SIX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSU

APRIL

15¢

STAR WESTERN

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

THE BIG PAGE MAGAZ

MISSOURI RIVER GUN-TALLY

VIVID NOVEL OF THE LAWLESS RANGE

by WALT COBURN

THE LOOTING OF GRAVELLY GAP

A NEW THEOBALD TERRY NOVELETTE BY

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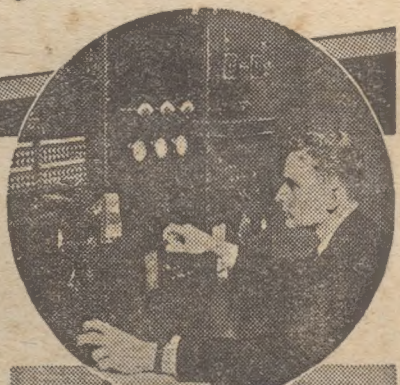

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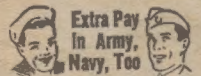

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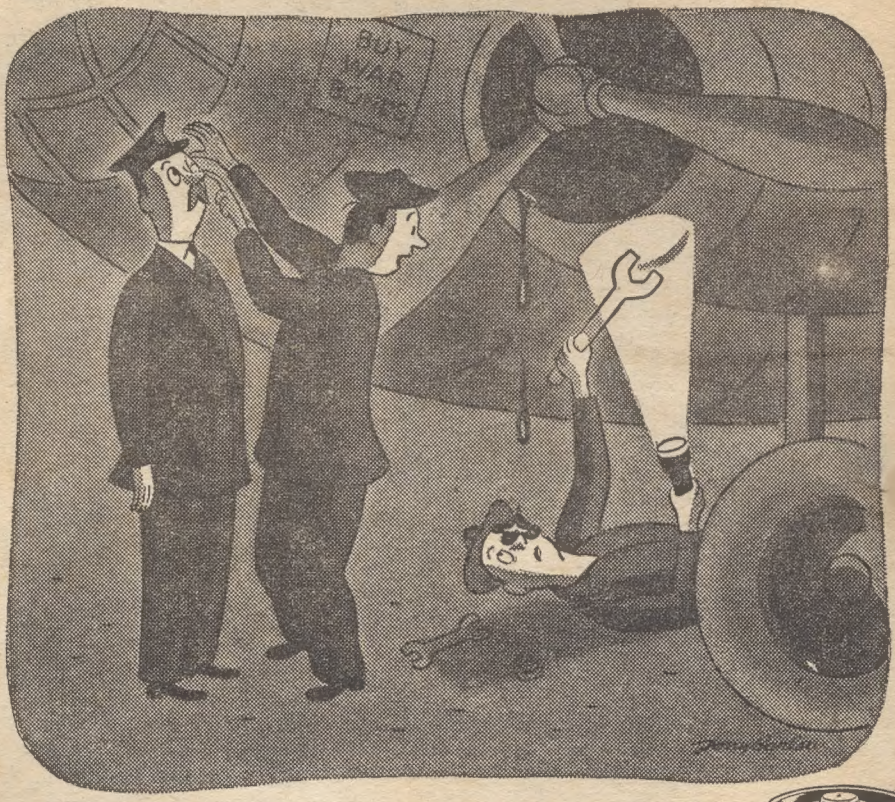

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STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME TWENTY-NINE APRIL, 1943 NUMBER THREE

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Star Western's in battle dress for the duration!

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The Branding Corral

Conducted by Strawboss

The echoes of embattled ranchers' guns still stir the memories of old-time Westerners.

THE real stories of some of the famous cattle wars of the West, it seems, have yet to be completely told, and the chances are some of their grim secrets will forever remain locked behind lips that have long since ceased to open. Recently we were re-reading one of the greatest first-hand accounts of one man's fight against overpowering odds that has ever come down to us—the diary found on the bullet-shattered body of Nate Champion outside his little ranch house near Kay Cee, Wyoming, over fifty years ago. And therein lies a question which so far as we know, has never been answered and likely never will.

Perhaps you remember that two trappers visited the ill-fated Champion and his pardner, Nick—"Doc"—Rae on the night of April Eighth, 1892. Aside from the invading "army," raised by the powerful cattle interests, these two men were the only witnesses to the bloody events that occurred there. Yet, to this day, no one apparently knows just what happened to those men. Whether they are now alive, or whether—as seems entirely possible—they were spirited away for all time, following the siege of the TA ranch on Crazy Woman Creek, offers plenty of room for speculation.

Recently we received a letter from an old timer now living in Vermont, who offers some interesting sidelights on that famous cattle-land conflict, as well as on some other topics of Western history. Welcome to the Fence Sitters' Syndicate, Mr. B. E. King!

In the public library of a certain big city is one of the original copies of Mercer's *Banditti of the Plains,* which sets forth, chiefly from sworn testimony, about as complete a picture of

(Please turn to page 122)

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When cold-blooded Jack Kibby, aided by his man-of-death, Sam Peacock, rigged that big-time cattle-steal on the Missouri, they tallied Lige Cutter—because he was stove-up and honest—as a peace-loving, harmless old fool!

★

Stirring Novel of Old Montana

★

MISSOURI RIVER GUN TALLY

By

WALT COBURN

The loaded quart bottle swung up. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Freeze-out

LATE October in Montana had turned cold enough to make a cowhand wonder what had become of his summer's wages. The sky was as cold and ugly gray as gun lead and the raw wind bit through leather and wool and

into his hide and the marrow of his bones. It had been spitting dry snow, and a skim ice was forming along the banks of the big Missouri River where the shallow water covered the edges of sandbars.

It was no kind of weather to be crossing cattle. Though the old Missouri was low at this time of the year, there was still a hundred foot strip of swimming water out in the swift channel. It was hell on the cowhands and tough on their horses and it wasn't doing the cattle any good. But the big cattle deal between Kibby and Kline's Rafter K outfit and the San Carlos Cattle Company had hung fire for six months before the two partners had signed over their Rafter K brand and all the cattle in that iron to the big syndicate-owned San Carlos Cattle Company. And now the Rafter K outfit was tallying over their cattle, as they were shoved across the wide Missouri to the newly purchased San Carlos range on the south side. When the weather was as cold as a gambler's heart and the river was wetter and colder than McGinty's feet in the bottom of the well.

The Rafter K outfit didn't give a damn how cold and wet and miserable a cowboy got. Stove up horses could be replaced. Any damage and shrinking done to the cattle that were changing owners would be the grief of the big San Carlos Company. And they patted their main ramrod and wagon boss, Sam Peacock, on the back for showing them where the delay was making a big profit for the partners Kibby and Kline.

"A man can't eat or drink or gamble on back slappin'," Big Sam Peacock had pointed out to the well pleased cattle partners who owned the Rafter K brand.

"A bonus, then, Sam!" suggested Nate Kline quickly.

"A cut of what we make out of it," decided Jack Kibby shrewdly. "It's your idea, Peacock. Swing it and we cut you in for ten percent of it."

"And I pass the buck to Kibby and Kline," nodded Sam Peacock, "if they ketch me at it."

"Twenty percent," growled Kibby, "and you stand on your own feet."

"Twenty percent of what I figure we'll make," protested Nate Kline, "is a lot of money."

"Twenty-five years in the Deer Lodge pen," said Sam Peacock flatly, "is a lot of years. That's what the judge dishes out to a cattle rustler. But I'll gamble a twenty-five year stretch for twenty-five percent of the big steal. I'll risk my own chances and won't holler if I git tripped up. Take it or leave it."

"Twenty-five percent," wailed Nate Kline, "That's robbery, Peacock!"

"What," grinned the big ramrod, "do you call the remainin' seventy-five percent that Kibby and Kline collect from the San Carlos Cattle Company?"

Nate Kline flinched like he'd been slapped. This was just another of the many times he wished he had left his money in the wholesale clothing business. He was a small man who loved his wife and children and the comforts of his home in Helena and the warm companionship of his cronies at the Montana Club. Fundamentally Nate Kline was an honest and kindly and warm hearted man. Crooked cattle deals frightened him. Kibby's ruthlessness awed him. And he was afraid of tough, hard-fisted, gun-packing cowhands like their foreman, Sam Peacock.

"Take a walk around the barn, Nate," growled Jack Kibby. "Take along your cryin' towel." He eyed Sam Peacock with cold, hard appraisal.

"It's a deal, Peacock. Twenty-five percent. But get this much straight: You're on your own. If you get caught, take your medicine. Try to drag me or Nate Kline into it and I'll have the judge throw the book at you. And don't think I can't have you sent over the road for a life stretch. I know where the corpse is buried, Peacock."

Nate Kline had left the ranch office and Jack Kibby was there alone with the tough ramrod he had hired to run the Rafter K outfit.

Kibby bit off the end of a thick black cigar and lit it. His ice blue eyes watched the big cowpuncher through the cigar smoke.

★

JACK KIBBY was a big paunchy man who dealt in gold mines and cattle ranches. He was a high stake gambler who seldom lost. Some of those

deals he had handled had made him enemies. But fear of the big man kept those enemies from facing him with the ugly accusations they whispered behind his broad back.

Jack Kibby had money and power here in Montana. He savvied how to handle tough cowhands like Sam Peacock. He had been a hard rock miner and a professional wrestler. Those big hands of his had broken men's bones. Even as his money and power had crushed others who had tried to stand in his way.

Sam Peacock came from that part of Oklahoma known as the old Cherokee Strip. There were some notches filed on his bone handled six-shooter. He had done his best, however, to cover the snake tracks along his back trail. His lips thinned under the black mustache. There was murder in his bloodshot yellow eyes as his hand crept towards his gun in its open holster.

"Don't try it, Peacock. You'd probably live a long time with a broken back. Years. But you'd never walk again. You'd have to drag yourself along the ground." Jack Kibby clenched and unclenched his big powerful hands. The big white teeth that clamped the expensive cigar were bared in a grin.

Sam Peacock's eyes slid away from the stare of the big cowman.

"I'm buyin' Nate Kline out," grinned Kibby. "I'm stockin' this range with sheep. I aim to buck range with these little sheep spreads that squatted around here and sheeped me out of the cow business. I'll beat 'em at their own game. Before I'm done they'll lay awake nights cussin' the name of Jack Kibby. I'll squeeze the life out of the sheep-stinkin' sons. . . . You handle this deal without gettin' caught, Peacock, and you'll have a ramrod job that'll be right up your alley. For the pay that you'll drag down, you kin stand the stink and blattin' of a few thousand woolies. Now git back to your round-up camp. Watch your step. It'll be your neck, not mine, that gits broke if you stumble. You're strictly on your own, Peacock. So-long."

Sam Peacock rode back to his round-up camp with plenty of food for thought. It was a hard mixture of threat and promise. The risk and danger were big. But so were the profits. This wouldn't be the first time Sam Peacock had gambled his life and freedom for big stakes.

He had planned this cattle steal and he knew how to work it. Since he'd heard the first rumor that the Rafter K was dickering with the San Carlos Cattle Company, he'd begun his planning. Take any kind of a big cattle deal like that, and there was a wide open chance for a man with guts and rustler brains to make himself a profit on the side. When he had his scheme all figured out, he took it to Jack Kibby. Kibby had liked the idea. That settled it.

Kibby wasn't what you'd call a real cowman, but he had sense enough to know it. That was why he'd hired a man like Sam Peacock to ramrod the big Rafter K outfit. That was no more than a year ago. The hiring of Sam Peacock had nearly caused the breaking of the partnership between Kibby and Kline.

"We already got a general manager, Kibby," Nate Kline had protested. "There ain't a better foreman in Montana than old Lige Cutter. You said it yourself that old Lige is the best beef man in the cow country. Ain't his beef topped the Chicago markets every shipment? And old Lige Cutter is honest, Kibby. As sound and honest as a fifty dollar gold piece, United States mint."

"Sure old Lige Cutter is honest, Nate. So damned honest he feeds his outfit on Rafter K beef. And every damned little nester outfit around that part of the country, even the stinkin' sheep outfits, are likewise butcherin' big fat Rafter K steers. Old Lige knows how to handle a beef herd to put the taller on their ribs. So we'll keep old Lige to handle the beef herds. But we'll put Sam Peacock on as main ramrod.

"Peacock savvies how to cut corners. He won't feed his outfit on our beef. And he'll drag more work out of his cowpunchers and ranch hands in a month than old sound and honest Lige Cutter gits out of 'em in a year. Fight fire with fire. Beat these little cattle rustlers at their own game till they get belly cramps. Sam Peacock'll make us a hundred times the fightin' wages he draws every month."

Nate Kline put forth his last argument. It turned out to be weaker than skimmed

milk. "If he crooks them other outfits, Kibby, what's to keep him from mebby crooking you and me?"

"Sam Peacock is playin' hookey from the penitentiary, Nate. He knows that I know it. He knows I won't hesitate to turn him back into the pen if he tries to hold out on us or doublecross us."

"I don't know why I didn't leave my money in the wholesale clothing business, Kibby. Crookedness, I don't like. With old Lige Cutter running the outfit, I sleep good. I move with my wife and kids to California, when winter comes."

"I'm dickerin' with the San Carlos Cattle Company, Nate," Jack Kibby had then broken another bit of news. "They own big ranches in South America and Mexico. It's the biggest land and cattle syndicate in the country. They're closin' a deal for all the land they can buy south of the Missouri. We'll sell 'em our cattle and the Rafter K brand. Clean our range. Then stock it with sheep."

"Not sheep, Kibby! Sheep stink. They eat too much. They pile up and die by the thousands in a blizzard. Not sheep!"

"Then I'll buy your half interest in the land, Nate. You can retire for life. Or go back into the clothing business."

"In California, Kibby!" nodded little Nate Kline. "Oranges. An orange ranch. Grandma and the kids, they like to walk out of the house and pick oranges off the trees. Mama will have flowers. Flowers, Kibby, she likes better than anything. Cows she's afraid of. It's a deal, Kibby. We shake hands on it."

It was after they had shaken hands on the deal that a worried look clouded the warm, kindly brown eyes of Nathan Kline.

"Old Lige Cutter hates sheep, Kibby."

"Mebby the old granny likes oranges, Nate. Take him along with you to California. If he can pick 'em a-horseback he'll do to take along. Old Lige Cutter will be through here."

CHAPTER TWO

The Fight at the Round-Up Camp

OLD LIGE CUTTER was through with the Rafter K outfit. Or at any rate, he'd be through when the last of the Rafter K cattle were tallied over to the two San Carlos tally men and shoved across the wide old Missouri River.

A week ago at the weaning corrals, he had voiced his old cowhand's too honest opinion, and he had spoken his own verdict.

"Them big calves shoulda bin weaned anyhow two weeks ago. Separatin' them cows and calves now is goin' to play hell."

"That's what you think, Gran'maw," Sam Peacock's grin had been mocking and a little contemptuous. "We're holdin' back the calves. Crossin' the cows with the first bunch we tally over to the San Carlos outfit. Hold back the calves, savvy, for a separate tally. Shove them cows acrost the wide Missouri."

"The Missouri River is wide, Peacock," said the little old cowhand, "but it shore as hell ain't wide enough ner swift enough to keep them cows from crossin' back to hunt them calves that ain't bin weaned off proper ner long enough from their mammies."

"Then we git to tally the cows twice, Gran'maw." Sam Peacock grinned and walked away.

The big black haired ramrod had turned and walked back to old Lige Cutter. Peacock was still grinning but there was a dangerous glint in his narrowed yellow eyes.

"The San Carlos outfit will have a couple of tally reps on the job to take delivery. You needn't call their attention to ary cows that's crossed back durin' the night. Even an old codger like you wants to live out the rest of his years. Don't talk outa turn and you stand a chance of livin' a while longer."

Old Lige Cutter knew now that it had been shrewd calculation, not bullheaded ignorance that had delayed the weaning of the cows and big calves. A thousand cows and big calves were being separated at the several weaning corrals. At least half of those cows would cross back during the night to hunt their calves. Tally that many cows twice and the profit at the payoff would run into a whole heap of money.

Little grizzled old Lige Cutter had a mind to quit then and there. But the outfit had been split into two big round-up

crews. Sam Peacock had taken his pick of the men and was wagon bossing one outfit. Old Lige had been left with a sorry crew of new cowpunchers to work his half of the range. Neither Jack Kibby or Nate Kline had showed up. Lige was too loyal to quit the outfit in a tight. And as long as he was drawing Rafter K pay, that same cowpuncher loyalty sealed his mouth.

They had been crossing cattle now for three days. Holding back what cattle remained in two big day herds. Mixed herds that were hell to hold because of those same half weaned calves and cows. A lot of those cows had crossed back after nightfall.

All night and all day their bawling never ceased. And the confusion added to the misery of wet clothes that never dried, the long hard, dangerous hours of the day when they coaxed and fought the cattle across the swift icy river. Long, black hours of night-guarding cattle that would not bed down. Three days and nights of freezing hell. And there was more to come.

There was a big log bonfire on each bank of the river. Near each fire was a whiskey keg on tap and battered tin cups to drink the raw whiskey out of. But the big blaze scorched their bellies while the raw wind cut their wet backs. And no amount of the straight forty rod whiskey could take the cramps out of their cold wet muscles.

They ached and coughed and sneezed and swallowed quinine with the whiskey. One cowpuncher had drowned. Horses got stove-up and sick. Men hugged the fire and sipped strong black coffee and whiskey until Sam Peacock cussed them back into the river for another drive.

When a man balked, Sam Peacock worked him over with his fists or the barrel of his white handled gun. They hated him and cussed him behind his back but they were too scared of the big ramrod from the Cherokee Strip to quit.

Sam Peacock carried no checkbook. He told them that any man that quit would have to get his check from Jack Kibby at the home ranch. And he told them what Kibby would do to any quitter.

The older of the two San Carlos tally reps came down with a bad case of the grippe that threatened to turn into pneumonia. He pulled out for town.

The other tally man, a Texan called Pecos Saunders, told Sam Peacock to keep the cattle coming. That he could handle the tally job without his pardner.

"Loan me one of your Rafter K men, Peacock."

"Take your pick, mister."

"That little old feller yonder will do. Lige Cutter."

"Hell, man, he's runnin' the other wagon. He's a wagon boss!"

"Yeah. I know. You didn't aim to sluff off your cook or horse wrangler on me for a tally man, did you, Peacock?"

Pecos Saunders was a big rawboned man with a shock of uncombed graying red hair, a wide grin and a pair of puckered gray blue eyes. He rode a string of big stout horses that were water dogs in the river and he handled himself and his horse in the cold swift current with the ease of a small boy wading a summer creek.

He had all the earmarks of a top cowhand but if he had caught onto the fact that a lot of those Rafter K cows had crossed back after dark and were being tallied twice, he kept his mouth shut about it.

Sam Peacock was wondering if, when the big tally was added up, this Pecos Saunders wouldn't call him off to one side with some kind of a proposition to split the profits on the twice counted cattle. So Sam Peacock was ready to dicker or fight when that time came, depending on how the red-headed Texan made his proposition. And he was too cagey now to hurt his game with a bonehead argument.

"Take old Lige, then. You're robbin' me of the best man I got!"

"Yeah. I know that. But I didn't think you did. You bin treatin' the ol' feller like he was a half-witted stepson."

Sam Peacock grinned flatly and walked back to the mess wagon where the whiskey keg was.

Old Lige Cutter was standing as close to the big open fire as he could. He was humped over and his old muscles were cold and cramped and stiff. He nursed a big tin cup with both hands. It was filled with strong steaming black coffee.

Lige was the only man in the outfit who was not working on whiskey. With Lige Cutter it had always been and always would be, one drink, one drunk. And he was afraid to trust himself to take that one first drink. Though the odor of the stuff that came from the filled cups of the men on either side of his was torturing.

Every fiber of his cold, wet aching old body craved whiskey. But he had to fight it back and content himself with the promise that, when the last of the cattle were crossed, he'd fill a water bucket with whiskey and lay here by the fire and drink it all, without sharing so much as a drop.

The cowpunchers stood humped in a tight circle around the big fire. Fifteen or twenty of them. Their clothes were wet from the day's work and their hides were shriveled and their bones ached. They were using whiskey to melt the slush ice in their veins.

Lige was dreading the long night that was coming in an hour or so. The long, dark hours when he'd ride, humped over his saddle horn, around a bawling, restless herd. And he was trying not to think of a long white winter that was coming when he'd be broke and out of a job. Too damned prideful to beg. . . .

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SAM PEACOCK came over from the whiskey keg with a filled cup. He stood for a minute or so outside the tight circle of shivering cowpunchers. Then he grinned flatly and reached into his pocket. He shouldered his way in between old Lige and another man. He had his big hand filled with .45 cartridges.

"You fellers stand around like a bunch of sulled cattle. What this outfit needs is a touch of highlife."

They all saw him toss the big handful of cartridges into the blazing fire, and nobody knew just what those lead slugs would do when the heat exploded the cartridges. They began edging back away from the big blaze, cutting hard, ugly looks at the big grinning ramrod. Sam Peacock's bloodshot yellow eyes taunted them.

Old Lige Cutter backed away with his cup of coffee, limping on stiff-jointed, rheumatic legs.

"Gran'maw," grinned Sam Peacock, "is kinda gun-shy. Like a scared bird dawg."

The cartridges began exploding. Showers of big sparks scattered the circle of cowpunchers. They backed away, stumbling into one another, slapping at the big red live sparks that showered them.

Until Sam Peacock had the fire all to himself. He stood there on big widespread legs, his eyes glittering wickedly, teeth bared in a mirthless grin. One buckskin-gloved hand slapped the sparks from his damp shirt. He lifted his cup of whiskey and drank.

The exploding cartridges had done no damage. The bullets had kicked up a few sparks but they had traveled only a few inches. It was a harmless enough joke, but it had taken the men who needed warmth away from the blaze. They were sullen when they drifted back to form a new circle.

One of them had been sitting on an upturned kyack box. Sam Peacock reached for it. But Pecos Saunders shoved out a long arm and picked up the rawhide covered kyack box.

"Sit down here, Lige," the tall, red-headed Texan pulled the old wagon boss by the arm and sat him down on the box.

It was far worse than if Pecos Saunders had actually pulled the box out from under him. That old trick might have been comical and Sam Peacock sitting down abruptly on the ground would have been a ludicrous sight and good for a big laugh all around. And Sam Peacock, victim of that old and trite practical joke, could have swallowed his anger and injured pride and passed off the incident by brushing off the seat of his britches and joining in the general laughter.

But this was different. There were no laughs. Only a few hard-lipped mocking grins. There was nothing to detract from the simple fact that Sam Peacock had used a shabby, two-bit trick to hog the best place at the fire, when the red-headed San Carlos tally rep had given away his coveted seat to the oldest cowhand in camp, to whom the place rightfully belonged.

The insult in all its crude bluntness was there. Right there for Sam Peacock to pick up or let lay. He could either back down or fight. He couldn't afford to back down. He was the big tough two-fisted, gun-packing ramrod who bragged that he could whip any two men in the outfit without working up a sweat. He was the big bulldozer who had his outfit bluffed and too scared to quit. He couldn't laugh it off because Pecos Saunders had left him nothing to laugh at.

He had to fight or turn his ramrod job back to old Lige Cutter, from whom he'd taken it like he'd tried to take the rawhide kyack box Lige always sat on to sip his coffee and rest his aching old bowed legs. If Pecos Saunders had spent all his time studying it out he couldn't have done a better job of insulting Sam Peacock.

Sam Peacock was half drunk. It took several long seconds for him to grasp the full significance of it all. He saw the grins on the faces of his men. He saw old Lige Cutter sitting down on the rawhide covered kyack box. That big rawboned, red-headed San Carlos tally rep standing there between him and old Lige, a faint grin on his homely weatherbeaten face.

The high color drained from Peacock's swarthy skin, leaving it a muddy yellow. He threw the big tin cup with what little whiskey there was left in it, straight at Pecos Saunders' face. Then rushed the big Texan backwards, his arms flailing.

Pecos Saunders had ducked his head so that the thrown cup grazed his cheekbone, but some of the whiskey splashed into his eyes. It stung like acid, blinding him.

Peacock might have won his fight right now if he had stayed out of reach, and hammered the blinded San Carlos man with sledge-hammer blows. But the big ramrod was too mad to think fast. He charged like a bull and when Pecos Saunders went over backwards he groped blindly with both hands, grabbed the front of Peacock's flannel shirt, and hauled the big Rafter K ramrod down with him.

The lanky Texan wrapped an arm around Peacock's neck and locked his head down. Peacock sank his big teeth deep in the Texan's shoulder and hung on like a bulldog. Pecos grunted with pain and his big hand found Sam Peacock's face. His calloused thumb hooked the corner of the other man's mouth and yanked, ripping the side of the big ramrod's mouth and his fingers gouged one of Peacock's eyes.

Sam Peacock's jaws opened and the big teeth let go their grip. He bellowed with pain, shaking his head to free it from the tearing, gouging hand of the other man. His head was yanked upward, swiveling on the thick neck, and Pecos rolled him over sideways and under. As his hand came loose he doubled his fist and pounded short, savage blows into the ramrod's face.

Peacock ducked and took the rest with his head, until Pecos realized he'd break his fist on the man's skull. His big fingers spread open and he grabbed the Oklahoman's thick curly black hair and yanked. Peacock, pinned underneath, got both arms free. His two hands grabbed the Texan's shock of graying red hair.

It's a honkytonk hair pullin' contest!" shouted a cowpuncher.

Both men yanked and pulled. Then Peacock got one leg free and he drove his knee hard into the Texan's stomach. Pecos let out a sound that was a mixture of grunt and groan. Sickening pain doubled him up and his hands and arms went weak.

Sam Peacock heaved and twisted out from under and staggered to his feet. He kicked hard at the Texan's pain twisted face. Pecos' eyes had cleared from the whiskey blindness and he saw the kick coming and rolled over, grabbing desperately with both hands at the spurred boot that grazed his jaw. The spur rowel ripped one of his hands but he didn't feel the pain. He'd made a lucky grab and he held onto the spurred boot.

★

HE DOUBLED up and rolled. Sam Peacock was jerked off balance. He went over backwards with a dull heavy crash. One of his flailing arms smashed into the edge of the open fire but his shirt sleeve was damp and he still wore his buckskin gloves and the hot coals

did no more than barely scorch him. But his head was only a few inches from the fire and its blaze was red and menacing in his eyes. He let out a bellowing roar.

"Like a bull at a brandin' fire!" yelled a Rafter K cowboy.

Sam Peacock drove his other boot into the Texan's face. Pecos felt like he'd been kicked in the teeth by a Missouri mule. He let go Peacock's other leg. Then scrambled back onto his feet.

"Kick his face in, Pecos!" somebody yelled.

But Sam Peacock was back onto his feet. Both men were blood smeared and badly winded. They stood there, eyeing one another, their breath coming in heavy sobbing gasps. Their shirts were ripped and they had lost their hats and both men were bleeding at the nose, spitting blood from battered mouths.

Their wasn't ten pounds difference in their weight, though the bull-necked Peacock looked huskier than the tall rawboned Texan. They were well matched for size and weight and their only fighting science was that of the free-for-all, knock-down-and-drag-out saloon fighting. But both men had brute strength and plenty of guts and the ability to absorb a lot of tough punishment.

They advanced slowly, circling one another. Then Sam Peacock rushed. Pecos Saunders stood fast. His legs were braced and his boot heels dug into the half frozen ground. He stopped the other man's bull rush with a hard, clumsy, lucky right and left that lifted Peacock's lowered head and halted him in his tracks.

Then they stood leg to leg and slugged it out. Their heavy fists landed with dull spatting sounds like hands clapping. Peacock's buckskin gloves were sodden and red.

Pecos Saunders had not opened his clenched teeth. But Sam Peacock was bellowing hoarse curses from his torn mouth.

It was an ugly, brutal thing to watch and one young cowboy had left the circle of watchers and had sat down on the ground and was vomiting the whiskey he'd been spilling into a raw empty stomach.

Old Lige Cutter moved around restlessly. His puckered blue eyes watched every blow that landed. His gnarled hands were bunched into fists and he was muttering into his drooping white mustache.

Time had been when Lige Cutter had been handy with his dukes and he had spent the long months of one memorable winter tending bar in Havre, where he worked out with a stable of ham and egg prize fighters. Now he had a dirty dish towel and a bucket of water and he moved around like the third man in a prize ring, giving unheeded bits of half remembered prize ring advice to Pecos Saunders. He kept muttering that one fifth-rate lightweight could rip the pair of them to ribbons without getting so much as a shiner.

"Keep that left duke out in front, Pecos. . . . One-two! He's wide open as a corral gate . . . Take your time. *Git 'im!*"

The arms of both men were as heavy as lead clubs. Their faces were battered and their eyes half blinded by sweat and blood.

Then Sam Peacock fell into a roundhouse swing and he dropped like a shot beef.

"Kick his damned face in, Pecos!" shouted a cowboy. "Tromp his guts out!"

Old Lige Cutter was counting in a sharp, creaky voice. When he reached the count of ten he grabbed Pecos Saunders's blood smeared right hand and held it high.

"The winner, gents! Pay your bets an' sleep in the street!"

He sat the lanky Texan down on the rawhide covered kyack box that had caused the fight, and began washing the blood and sweat and dirt from the winner's battered face.

Sam Peacock got slowly to his hands and knees, his head sagging and blood spilling from his nose and mouth. A couple of cowpunchers wanted to help him to his feet but he spat blood and dirt and cursed them in a sobbing, croaking whisper. Then he got onto his feet and walked unsteadily to the edge of the river where he got down on all fours and buried his head and face in the icy water.

He was walking fairly steady when he made his way to the whiskey keg. But his hands were shaking as they lifted a filled tin cup of raw whiskey to his battered mouth. The tin cup held about half a pint and he downed it in two or three big gulps.

His bone handled six-shooter had fallen

out of its tied holster during the fight. One of Peacock's toadies had picked it up. He fetched it over to the whiskey keg now. Sam Peacock took it without a word. His eyes were battered to bloodshot yellow slits. He waited until the forty rod whiskey hit home. Then he walked back towards the campfire, his gun in his hand.

"Git outa the way, you sons!" he croaked at the cowpunchers grouped around Pecos Saunders who still sat on the kyack box.

"Fill your hand, you sorrel-maned, inbred Texican snake!"

Pecos Saunders got to his feet. "My gun's in my bed at the San Carlos camp acrost the river, Peacock. I ain't heeled. When we git these cattle tallied, I'll be proud to take you on. Till then, we'd better forgit it. We're bein' paid to tally over them Rafter K cattle to the San Carlos outfit. We better git that job done before we take up the argument again where we left off."

Sam Peacock stood spread legged there for a long moment. Then he shoved the white handled six-shooter into the open holster tied low on his thigh.

"No man," he said flatly, "has ever licked me and lived to brag about it, mister. Where I come from. . . ."

"I know where you come from, Peacock," said Pecos Saunders, "Mebbyso I know why you left the Cherokee Strip. Now let it ride till we git done with the cattle tally. I'll be packin' a gun. And I'll be almighty proud to use it."

Where Pecos Saunders came from, down in Texas, that word proud meant glad and eager.

CHAPTER THREE

Pecos Plays His Hand

SAM PEACOCK was getting sober on that last big drink. Sober, and a little sick inside. He'd been sucked into a fight and been licked and he had to play his string out now with a gun. He'd just naturally played hell with his chances of making a sneak dicker with that sorrel-maned Texican on those twice tallied

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2. APPLY LATHER or Brushless Shaving Cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently
3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves
4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

cows. And somehow he knew that Pecos Saunders was plenty wise to how and why those cows had gotten back on the Rafter T side of the Missouri River.

That San Carlos tally rep was playing it close to his lean belly and saying nothing. Wiser than a cottonwood tree full of owls. He was too much of a cowman to be cheated like some greenhorn pilgrim. The chances of buying Pecos Saunders off now were a long ways gone. Sam Peacock had tripped himself up. Jack Kibby wasn't going to like that worth a damn, and yonder stood that little old dried-up, white-maned Lige Cutter who was the cause of the whole ruckus.

"You, you damned old hunk of dried up jerky," Sam Peacock glared at old Lige Cutter, "You're too durned old to fist-whup. But you got a gun. Better start packin' it."

Old Lige Cutter nodded. "I was calculatin' the same thing, Peacock. I'll scrape the rust off that ol' hawg laig when I locate it, somewheres in my ol' warsack with my sixty years' gatherin's."

Old Lige's mess wagon and bed wagon were camped back a few miles from the river on Mud Creek, where he was holding his day herd. He limped over to his saddled horse near the rope corral.

"Better loan me all your cowhands fer night guard, Peacock," he creaked. "I bin holdin' them cattle back from water all day so's they'll be dry enough to walk-bawl fer river water, come daybreak. They'll be hell to hold on the bedground. 'Specially them damned cows of yourn. . . That grub-spoiler of mine is buildin' a son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack, Pecos, if you want to eat supper at my wagon."

"Sounds like you're bribin' the San Carlos tally rep, Lige," grinned Pecos Saunders. He walked over to his horse and tightened his loose saddle cinch and mounted.

"Let's go, boys," Lige called to his men. "I got a keg at our wagon that ain't bin tapped. Send your men out on first guard, Peacock. I'll need 'em all. Ruckus er no ruckus, we're still drawin' Rafter K pay. Kibby likes fer every man to earn it."

Peacock watched old Lige and Pecos Saunders ride off together, Lige's cowpunchers trailing them. He filled a battered tin cup with whiskey and drank it.

The big Rafter K ramrod was battered and lame, but that empty sick feeling in the pit of his belly was worse than anything Pecos Saunders' fists had done to him. He'd tripped up. And big Jack Kibby would be showing up about the time they finished crossing old Lige's herd.

Kibby had liked that crooked trick his big ramrod from the Cherokee Strip had figured out. But he'd had warned him not to trip himself up. That big, cold-eyed cowman was already counting the crooked profit he'd make on the twice counted cows. Jack Kibby was a hard man who never made an excuse or accepted an excuse for a mistake.

Failure was a word that had been left out of Jack Kibby's book. And that big cold-blooded Kibby would break a man's spine and grin down into his screaming face and walk off. Then the broken man would crawl the rest of his life along the ground, dragging a pair of withering dead legs.

"You look," said a voice at his elbow, "fer all the world like a bull that's bin whupped outa the herd. Whoa, Peacock! Don't hit a man that fetches good news."

The cowpuncher's name was Fox and he was well named. A slim, shifty eyed cowpuncher who toadied to the big ramrod and fetched him all the cowpuncher gossip that was whispered in low tones behind Sam Peacock's back.

"There ain't no such thing, Fox, as good news."

"Pecos Saunders," Fox's voice dropped to a low and confidential tone, "can't swim a lick."

Fox rinsed out the least battered tin cup he could find. He was fussy as an old maid in some ways. He filled it half full of whiskey and poured black coffee in on top of the forty-rod booze. Then he looked straight into Sam Peacock's slitted, bloodshot eyes.

"Talk some more, Fox."

"I've bin watchin' him close," said Fox, "from the first day. Pecos Saunders rides a string of the best water horses I ever seen work in any man's fast river. And he savvies how to handle a horse in bad water. As long as he's in the saddle or hangin' onto the mane or tail of his swimmin' horse, he's as safe as he'd be

on dry land. But if somethin' was to separate him from that horse, Pecos Saunders would drown.

"Out there in the swift channel filled with swimmin' cattle, somethin' bad could shore happen awful easy to a man's horse. The best water horse in the world will turn belly up if his head gits shoved under and his ears and nose full of water. I was born and raised on the banks of this same old Missouri River. Swum it alone and a-horseback since I kin remember. Us kids used to ride out in the middle when she was bank high and boomin', and we'd rassle each other off our horses and duck one another's horses till they'd quit swimmin' and turn belly up an' float downstream. A horse will float thataway, keepin' his head an' nose out. Just quit an' float. Drift ashore or swim ashore after the current drifts him a mile or a few. The rider kin hang onto his floatin' geldin's tail and drift, likewise. But our game was to separate the rider from his pony. I know a dozen tricks to do it easy as shootin' fish. Still listenin', Peacock?"

"How much, Fox?" asked Peacock flatly.

"Half your cut on them two-time tallied cows. And I don't turn the trick till the last of the cattle is tallied. Marked down in Pecos Saunders' tally book. And I'll manage to git holt of that tally book before any water accident happens to the San Carlos tally rep. That's the big tally that will git turned in and they'll pay off on it. Pecos Saunders is playin' it close mouthed, ain't he? And he aims to play it thataway till the last of that mixed herd is tallied. Then he's aimin' to argue."

"You talk like you was Pecos Saunders' mind reader."

"I bin augerin' over the likker cups with some of them San Carlos cowhands acrost the river," grinned Fox. "Likker talk kin be mighty close to right sometimes."

"How would Pecos Saunders figger he'd git holt of the real honest cattle tally?"

"You and old Lige and Jack Kibby and Nate Kline got a hell of a close range count on all the cattle that was gathered. There wasn't the difference of ten head betwixt the four of you on the final count. Pecos Saunders knows all about that range tally. He aims to borrow or steal or buy old Lige Cutter's tally book. And right now I don't reckon that San Carlos tally rep would have much trouble talkin' ol' Lige outa that tally book that's in his warsack."

"So," said Sam Peacock, "that red-headed Texican is just stringin' me along on this cattle tally. He aims to turn in Lige Cutter's tally. And the big sorrel-topped son-of-a-snake is settin' hisself a wolf trap to ketch Sam Peacock. And ol' Lige Cutter will help him bait it. Damn their hearts. . . !"

"Ol' Lige," grinned Fox thinly, "has a cold. He's dosin' it with quinine. I don't reckon he kin smell good or taste good. If a man was to spike a cup of his coffee with a shot of booze, that ol' whiskey lover would be a goner. He'd be drinkin' whiskey straight the next cup. And he wouldn't quit till the keg went dry. And the swift middle of the Missouri River ain't no place for a drunk man, Peacock."

The tall, lean, slim Fox had a habit of winking slyly and rubbing the long end of his thin, pointed nose, holding his head a little to one side and looking up from under the slanted brim of his hat. It was an annoying habit that made Sam Peacock want to take that skinny neck between his hands and twist it.

Fox was a treacherous sneak. You couldn't trust him or depend on him, and if he got trapped he'd squeal. He'd quit in a tight because he had a yellow streak.

"You'd never git the job done, Fox," said Sam Peacock bluntly, "You haven't the guts."

Fox twisted his long nose and winked. "I'm no fightin' man, Peacock, but I kin ride out into that channel with you and I'll be the only one of us that gets ashore. And when I set that San Carlos tally rep afoot out in the broad middle of the river, it'll look for all the world like one of them accidents.

"You seen what happened to that smart Aleck cowboy called Pug Jones. You seen Pug slap me around when he found his damned razor in my warsack. You seen him day before yesterday when his horse quit on him in the channel and he drowned. You heard anybody in the outfit say it wasn't an accident? Damn right you ain't. Nobody seen me swim my horse past his and reach out and yank his

bridle rein. I tipped that pony over backwards and went on. His horse come ashore but Pug Jones didn't. It's a damn good razor. I'll loan you the use of it when we split the proceeds."

"So you drowned Pug Jones?" A crafty look came into Peacock's battered yellow eyes.

"Don't git notions," grinned Fox. "You can't prove it. You'll lay the long green dough on the barrel head. And you'll be ridin' somewheres near when I tip Pecos Saunders over out there in the river. Ever see a jockey and his mount git pocketed in a horse race? That's the way me'n you will pocket Pecos. And if anybody's watchin' it'll look for all the world like me'n you was tryin' to save the pore San Carlos rep's life. It'll be me'n you. And you can't cheat on the payoff."

"I don't want a damn thing to do with it, Fox!"

"Put it down in writin' that you'll pay me so much cash for drowndin' Pecos Saunders," Fox winked and twisted his long nose, "and I'll do the job all by my lonesone."

"To hell with any part of it, Fox. I'd orter wring your damned skinny buzzard's neck!"

"But you won't, Peacock. Because I'm the Fox that kin drag down that big tally money for me'n you. You'll be wantin' to see that scared look on Pecos's face and in his eyes when he drowns. Ain't that worth a few bucks? Damn right you'll be sidin' me. And you'll help me git the job done. Because why? Because Pecos Saunders is a warthog with a six-shooter, and you've ribbed a gun-fight you're scared to tackle. If Pecos don't gut-shoot you, ol' Lige Cutter will. See yuh later, Peacock."

Fox tilted his head sideways and winked slyly and gave his long thin beaked nose a last twist. Then walked away.

Sam Peacock scowled after him. Then he drained the whiskey in his tin cup and refilled it. An ugly, crafty grin spread across his battered face. Fox was just one more man he'd have to kill when the sign was right. After the river-wise Fox had gotten his water chores done. Another notch to file on the white bone handled six-shooter.

THE night was black and cold and a thousand years long. Old Lige Cutter shivered and shook in his saddle. His teeth chattered, his clamped jaws ached and his saddle warped old legs were numb as wooden sticks. But he held his restless herd and when the first streak of daybreak showed he was pointing the bawling cattle for the river bank. Then he turned the point over to one of his best cowhands and headed his leg-weary horse for camp. He'd get a cup of coffee and change horses and get back to the moving herd in time to point the leaders across. But he knew he'd have to get somebody to help him out of his saddle.

Pecos Saunders had borrowed a Rafter K horse and stood an all night guard. He caught up with old Lige and rode with him to camp and lifted him out of his saddle, standing him on his feet beside the cook's big sheet iron stove in the mess tent.

The San Carlos tally rep filled a cup half full of raw whiskey and poured hot coffee in on top of it. He shoved the spiked drink into old Lige's gnarled hands.

"It'd take a gallon of forty rod likker to thaw you out, Lige. After that it'd take a quart to make the drunk come. You're too much man, old timer, to be scairt of a shot of booze. And another thing, young feller: If I ketch you ridin' into that river today, I'll bend a gun acrost that boneheaded skull of yourn. Now drink hearty."

Old Lige knew that he'd need whiskey if he expected to tough it out all that day. His fare was gray and pinched, his lips stiff and blue. The edge of the tin cup rattled against his teeth. But when he had gulped down his second cup of whiskey and coffee and its warmth saturated his body he quit shivering and the color came back into his gray skin with its week's stubble of white whiskers.

His puckered bloodshot sky blue eyes twinkled. "Want to run a footrace, Pecos?"

Pecos Saunders had half a dozen big stout horses from his string in the Rafter K remuda. He roped a big brown and told old Lige to throw his saddle on a big flax-maned sorrel that wore the San Carlos brand.

"You'll swear you've bin afoot all your life, Lige, till you forked big Flaxy. He'll pack a man back and forth acrost that river all day and never wet your saddle skirts. But your orders is to stay outa the water. You got a plenty to do on dry land. Me'n you tally 'em acrost. Let them hired hands earn the swimmin' wages."

Old Lige grinned. He knew that they'd both be in and out of the river all day long, regardless. That's why Pecos was staking him to the best river horse in his string.

"You're all white man, Pecos."

Old Lige had gotten a long-barreled wooden-handled six-shooter out of his warsack. Likewise a leather-covered tally book. It was a duplicate of the tally book he'd been using to tally with the San Carlos rep.

"Shove this somewheres, Pecos," he said as they rode along, "where it won't git wet. When we cross the last of these cattle, I'm done with the Rafter K outfit. Quittin' before I'm fired. That tally book holds the real count on the Rafter K cattle. After I've quit the outfit, and if the play comes up thataway, I'm free to tell the truth. Sam Peacock and Jack Kibby ain't too big ner too tough to scare me. Nate Kline, by hell, is square and honest enough to back me up. I reckon, Pecos, you're cowman enough to savvy what I'm talkin' about."

Pecos Saunders nodded. "I savvy, Lige. I was aimin' to ask you for your tally book. I know all about the big tally Kibby and Kline and you and Sam Peacock got on the Rafter K cattle. That shifty-eyed cowpuncher called Fox wanted to sell me the tally book he'd stolen outa Peacock's warsack. He asked a thousand dollars for it. So I taken the book and slapped his mouth and told him to collect the thousand from Sam Peacock. Fox kinda left me with the notion he don't like me."

"Don't try to hand me no money or nothin", Pecos," said old Lige. "And don't git the idee that likker pried me loose from that tally book. I made the deal with myself and you last evenin' at Peacock's camp. Swapped the tally book fer a rawhide kyack box."

They grinned at one another. The whiskey, Lige said, was taking the kinks out of him without making him drunk. Then he said that Fox had a lot of snake blood in him and that Pecos had better cross over to the San Carlos camp and get his gun.

"No hurry about the gun, Lige. Peacock won't crowd the play till I've finished the cattle tally. By that time I'll be heeled. And by this time Fox has made medicine with Peacock, and Fox will be told to lay off till I've okayed the tally. Kibby and Kline is supposed to be on hand when the last of the cattle is tallied and crossed. They'll close the deal then with the big dog with the brass collar from the San Carlos Cattle Company. But the deal can't be closed till I turn in my okayed big tally. So Peacock and Fox ain't gunnin' for the Pecos goose till they find out he ain't goin' to lay 'em no golden eggs."

"Who is the big dog with the brass San Carlos collar, Pecos?"

"He's a close-fisted Scot named MacDougall. He's got the rep of bein' a hard man to shave in any kind of a deal."

They reached the drag end of the moving herd and rode along the swing and on up to the point. They were too busy from then on to talk. The cattle were dry and had to be held up and spread out to keep them from piling up.

Old Lige and Pecos split up and they had the big steers in the lead out in swimming water and the rest of the mixed herd coming in a wide moving strip before they began tallying. Counting the leaders as they lunged through the shallow water and ashore on the south bank. Lige and Pecos Sanders were soaked to the waist as they sat their horses on the south bank.

"Tally a hundred with that brockle-faced steer!" called Lige.

"Tally a hundred!" Pecos sang out.

They had crossed over four hundred head when the cattle quit coming and Lige cussed the men on the north bank who had let the steady moving strip of cattle break apart.

"That damned know-it-all Peacock!" creaked old Lige. "Calls hisself a cowman. Lettin' them cattle sull and balk. We'll lose an hour gittin' 'em strung out and into the water!"

The raw wind had stiffened their sodden pants and numbed their legs. They rode over to the San Carlos wagon for whiskey. Old Lige kept cussing Peacock for letting the cattle balk. The whiskey and hot coffee was doing no more than thaw out his cramped cold muscles. The sullen gray sky had broken into fleecy clouds and the sun shone brightly but with little warmth. The wind cut like a frozen rawhide whip. Old Lige cussed that bright sun.

"It ain't a hot sun," admitted Pecos Saunders, "and that's a fact. But it makes a man feel warmer just to see it again. So why cuss it, Lige?"

Lige cut the younger man a sharp, hard look. "Then you ain't swum too many cattle, Pecos."

"This is my first big crossin'," the Texan grinned faintly. "I've seen more cattle crossed the past few days than I've ever seen in all the rest of my life put together, and I'm crowdin' forty and bin punchin' cows all my life."

"You make a good river hand. You got Peacock cheated to death. Barrin' Fox who was born and raised along the Missouri, you're the best water hand in the outfit."

"I know better than to fight a horse in swimmin' water. I got to depend all the way acrost on my horse. I can't swim a lick."

"Well I'll be damned!" Lige was remembering how Pecos had been right up on the point and the first man to get himself and his horse wet every time they shoved a bunch of cattle across. "You got guts, man!"

Pecos Saunders shook his head. "Scairt to death, pardner. But you ain't said why you was cussin' the shinin' sun."

"Cattle is hell to git swimmin' with the sun in their eyes. And that's where it'll be if Peacock keeps holdin' us up."

It was not until they were crossing back that old Lige noticed Pecos had neglected to get his six-shooter from his bedroll.

CHAPTER FOUR

Missouri River Gun Tally

IT WAS not Sam Peacock's ignorance or carelessness that had let the string of cattle break up and balk at the water's edge. The idea belonged to Fox and had been deliberate. Though he'd been cunning enough to make it seem like a boneheaded mistake.

"The way Lige Cutter handled his herd, Peacock," he cocked his head sideways and winked, "this herd would be acrost in three-four hours. We'd be done by noon. A few delays and we'll be pushin' the drags acrost about the first edge of dusk. That'll make it hard for these liker drinkin' cowhands to see what me'n you are doin' to Pecos Saunders out yonder in the swift channel."

"Me'n you, hell!" snarled Sam Peacock.

Fox tilted his head and winked from under his hatbrim and tweaked his thin beak. "Me'n you, Peacock," he said softly, and rode away to work the sulled cattle into the river.

Lige and Fox got the cattle started across once more. Old Lige was a river man, and the cowpunchers knew it and took his orders without a question. And when Lige told Peacock to stay back from the river's edge and to keep the cattle

moving, the big ramrod took his orders like a common forty a month cowhand. Though the look on his battered face was ugly and there was a wicked glitter in his slitted yellow eyes.

"As fer you, Fox," snapped old Lige, "You know better'n to make ary mistakes. You spoil the batter and I'll skin you alive!"

Fox cocked his head sideways and twisted his nose. "You ain't hittin' the keg are you, Lige?"

Old Lige snorted and rode off. Fox grinned after the old timer. The cattle kept moving.

Several times before noon the cattle got snarled up along the swing. Sam Peacock was following Fox's advice. Old Lige cussed and fumed but he couldn't be everywhere at once and he had no reason to suspect that Peacock might be deliberately holding back the cattle.

"Damn it, Peacock, keep them cattle a-movin' to us!"

They didn't stop for noon dinner. Old Lige would send them to camp in pairs to grab hot coffee and grub and get a change of horses. He and Fox and Pecos were in and out of the water all morning. Fox was treacherous and ornery and he licked Peacock's boots but he was worth half a dozen common cowhands at this river work. And under old Lige's sharp eyes he did his work.

They changed horses twice before the sun lowered to where it turned the river into a shimmering mirror that reflected the sun into the eyes of the swimming cattle. Each time they changed, Pecos staked old Lige to one of his top water horses and the San Carlos tally rep joshed the old cowhand about his taking drink for drink with him and not even showing it.

"But if ever I belly up to that bonfire where the heat hits me, Pecos, I'll be drunker'n seven hundred dollars."

But there was no time that day for anybody to hug the fire. And at sundown there was still several hundred cattle to cross and there would be no supper or warmsiding until the drags were across and the big cattle crossing was ended. Sam Peacock did not dare risk any more delays. Those cold, wet cowhands were rearing to get the job done and they'd turn on any man who made a blunder.

Big Jack Kibby showed up about sundown. He rode straight to where the chuck wagon and bed wagon were camped, without coming near the cattle and cowpunchers a mile or so away.

"I'd be underfoot," he told the cook as he ate supper in the mess tent. "I'm no cowpuncher. How are the boys standin' the grind?"

This was the round-up cook's chance to tell about the fight between Sam Peacock and the San Carlos tally rep. He told the story in all its blood-spattered detail. Jack Kibby was a good listener.

"It'll wind up in a gun-fight," predicted the cook, "shore as hell's warmer than yonder river."

Jack Kibby grinned flatly. He roped and saddled a fresh horse and rode slowly towards the river where the last of the drags were being crossed.

Fox saw Kibby first and took the news to Sam Peacock.

"The big dog with the brass collar is comin', Peacock. Big Jack Kibby hisself. He's stopped at camp and the grub-spoiler's told him about you lockin' horns with the San Carlos tally rep. Kibby will have a horn drooped. Pecos Saunders and Lige Cutter is just hittin' the water for their last crossin'. I heard Pecos tell ol' Lige he'd remember to git his gun when they got to the other side. I'm goin' out to duck Mister Pecos Saunders now. It's your last chance to save your taw. You comin' along?"

Pecos Saunders and old Lige Cutter were tallying the last of the drags into the river.

"Tally a last hundred!" called Pecos Saunders loudly. "*And* fifty eight!"

"*And* fifty eight!" shouted old Lige Cutter.

"That winds 'er up, cowhands!" Pecos Saunders shouted in a loud voice. "That tallies the Rafter K cattle out!"

He rode over to a big old cottonwood stump where he always put his tally book each time before he rode into the river. He leaned from his saddle and put his tally book and pencil on the tree stump. Then he rode into the river.

"You seen where he laid his tally book," Fox tilted his head and twisted his long nose till the end of it was red.

"You heard him holler he'd tallied out. He's crossin' over for his gun. It's our deal, Mister Peacock!"

Sam Peacock looked back across his shoulder and saw big Jack Kibby coming. The big ramrod's face was grayish yellow. He was afraid to face Kibby with any excuse. He was afraid to stand up to Pecos Saunders in a fair and square gunfight. His battered eyes were bloodshot and slitted as he rubbed the palm of his hand across his white bone handled six-shooter. His teeth bared in a wolfish grin.

"Let's git at it, Fox." He pulled a quart from his pocket and gulped down the raw whiskey. Then he passed it to Fox who drank and stowed away the bottle in his chaps pocket.

★

LIGE CUTTER was already quite a distance out in the river on the lower side of the swimming cattle. He was barely visible in the dark gray dusk. And about a hundred feet behind old Lige, Pecos Saunders was nearing the channel.

The cowpunchers in behind the drags were shouting to one another, joshing back and forth. A few minutes now and their work would be done. The San Carlos cowpunchers were waiting to take the drags away from them.

They'd ride back for the last time through that swift icy water to camp, strip off their wet clothes and put on the dry change of clothes they'd saved. Belly around the big blazing fire and drink whiskey.

They were in a jubilant humor. None of them paid any attention to Fox and Peacock as they rode into the deep water and were partly hidden in the dusk. Nor did they notice big Jack Kibby as he pulled his horse to a halt at the water's edge.

Old Lige Cutter, riding up on the lower side of the point, an easy stone's toss below the swimming cattle, felt cold and cramped and miserable. He had caught sight of big Jack Kibby.

He was remembering that he was all through. He was quitting the Rafter K before Kibby had a chance to tell him he wasn't needed any longer. He had less than a hundred dollars coming. He wasn't taking a dollar more from the outfit.

He was glad Nate Kline wouldn't be here to pay him off. He liked Nate. That little feller would try to hand him extra money or make some kind of a big hearted gesture which old Lige was too damned proud to take.

Old Lige Cutter was through—finished. He didn't have a chance of a job with the big San Carlos outfit. They had their own cowpunchers from Texas and were as clannish as hell. Lige Cutter was a Texan but he'd lived so long in Montana that he didn't figure he belonged among the San Carlos Texans. And if there was a chance that they'd hire an old stove-up codger, that tally rep Pecos would have said so.

That Scotchman, MacDougall, was general manager of the San Carlos Cattle Company. He had a tough rep for being close fisted and he did all the hiring and firing. There was the long winter ahead. Lean, hard, cold years stretching out. . . .

The whiskey inside old Lige had died and he was old and played out and finished. . . .

He heard a queer kind of a sound behind him. It could be heard above the blowing of his swimming horse and the swimming cattle. A sound like a man makes when he's choking and coughing, drowning.

Lige looked back across his shoulder. He saw a man kicking and splashing wildly in the dark gray water. The man's saddled horse was fifty or sixty feet downstream, just coming to the surface and snorting and blowing as it swam. And riding their swimming horses away and beyond reach of the drowning man were two riders. Those two men were Fox and Sam Peacock.

Lige leaned along the neck of his horse with his hat in his hand. He turned his horse downstream and around by slapping with his hat and reining cautiously so as not to pull his horse over backwards. And that drowning man he knew was Pecos Saunders.

Old Lige's big horse was headed straight for the drowning man. So were Fox and Peacock, now. Lige unbuckled his rope strap and knotted the end of the rope around his saddle horn. As he shook a

loop into his catch rope he heard Sam Peacock yell at him.

"Keep outa this, you damned ol' son!"

Old Lige was so close now to Sam Peacock that he could see the big ramrod's bared teeth. Then the six-shooter in Peacock's hand.

The drowning San Carlos rep was downstream fifty feet, too far away to rope. And Fox was headed straight downstream between Lige and Peacock and towards Pecos Saunders.

"I'll git Pecos!" shouted Fox. "Play your hand out, Peacock!"

Lige didn't know what Fox meant. Fox was the best river man in the outfit. He could reach Pecos in time to grab him. But there was a vicious look on Fox's lean, long-nosed face and he was holding a half filled quart bottle of whiskey in his hand as a man holds a club.

Then the gun in Peacock's hand cracked, spitting fire. The heavy .45 slug seared old Lige's left shoulder, ripping the lean hard muscle and grazing the bone, jerking the old cowhand sideways in his saddle. Peacock wasn't twenty feet away now.

Old Lige acted by instinct. The noose in his hand sped out. The rope was wet and stiff. As the rope dropped over Peacock's head and the upraised arm with the six-shooter, old Lige jerked it tight with all his might.

Peacock let out a bellow of fear and rage and grabbed at the rope with his free hand. But that hand held his bridle reins and the sudden, hard yank pulled the head of his swimming horse up and around sideways. The hard quick yank pulled the horse over.

Peacock was thrown and pulled into the swift current by Lige's rope. He kicked and flailed the water and the gun in his other hand roared again. Fox let out a yelp of pain and jerked backwards in his saddle.

Peacock's gun arm had slid free of the wet noose. But that did him more harm than good. Because the noose tighted with a jerk around his thick neck and he was gasping and screaming horribly as his head went under water.

His bewildered horse was breaking water. One of the shod hoofs crashed down on Peacock's head as he came up. Then the terrified horse was pawing Peacock with both front feet.

Lige yanked the end of the rope free from the saddle horn and let go. He caught a split-second glimpse of Sam Peacock's face before the horse pawed the man under.

That wild bullet from Peacock's gun had grazed Fox's ribs. Fox still gripped the bottle. He had tried to ride down the half drowned San Carlos rep, but his swimming horse had swerved and Pecos Saunders, threshing the water had grabbed at the horse's mane. His clawing hand had grabbed the coiled catch rope strapped on Fox's saddle and he clung to it with a drowning man's tenacity.

Fox was clubbing at Pecos' head with the bottle. The blow missed the drowning man's head and smashed against the swelled fork of his saddle cantle. Fox threw the broken bottle into Pecos' face. Then he jerked his six-shooter.

"You damned Fox!" yelled old Lige Cutter. He was jerking desperately at his long barreled gun. It was held in its open holster by a leather string with a slit cut in it that fitted over the gun hammer. Lige's numb fingers were clumsy.

He saw Fox twist sideways in his saddle. Fox's face was as gray white as a fish's belly, and his sandy whiskers stood out like bristles on a hog. His crooked teeth were bared and his pale, shifty eyes were glinting like the eyes of a trapped animal. The gun in Fox's hand spewed flame, and the heavy slug smashed old Lige's left shoulder, the thudding force of it jerking him in his saddle. Then his old six-shooter yanked free and he was not ten feet away when he started shooting.

His first bullet hit Fox in the belly and the second .45 slug hit the man's tilted face. Fox's dead body reeled backwards and into the water.

Lige's left arm dangled limply. The bridle reins had slid from his nerveless hand. As his horse swam against Fox's, Lige dropped his gun in the river and made a frantic grab for the sodden grayish red hair of the San Carlos rep, as Pecos Saunders, half drowned, clinging to the coiled saddle rope, pulled so hard that the rope strap broke leaving him

floundering in the icy gray water with the rope still clutched in his hand.

"Hang on, Lige! For God's sakes, hang on!"

The voice came from behind old Lige and it sounded far away and he could not turn his head to look because he had to keep that grip on the San Carlos rep.

IT WAS big Jack Kibby who rode past Lige and racked out a huge arm. His hamlike hand grabbed the drowning Pecos Saunders by the back of his shirt and lifted him half out of the water.

"Take 'er easy, Kibby," old Lige's voice was croaking sound.

But the double weight had pulled Kibby's horse off balance and over on its side. Lige groaned. He made a futile grab as the two men went under.

Kibby's head and face broke the surface of the cold dark gray water. The big man had rolled over onto his back and with one arm he was pulling Pecos Saunder's head and shoulders up out of the water and holding him there as he swam on his back, using one huge powerful arm. There was a grin on Kibby's face.

"I got 'im, Lige. Get yourself ashore. You look like hell, old-timer."

"You kin make it with him, Kibby."

"I swum the Niagara rapids on my honeymoon," grinned Jack Kibby. "Won enough on the bet to pay all expenses."

"Didn't know you was married," muttered Lige, trying to match the cowman's grin as his horse's front feet struck the sandy bottom about the same time Kibby reached wading water.

Jack Kibby swung the San Carlos rep's limp, sodden bulk into his arms and carried him as easily as he'd carry a child.

"My bride was holdin' the stakes. When I come ashore she was gone. So was the stakes. Never saw her or the ten thousand dollars afterwards. I was wrasslin' and swimmin' races for a livin'. It was all the dough I had and half of it was borrowed from my backers. It took me two years of steady wrasslin' to pay it back. That busted my faith in women."

They had landed nearly a mile below where the cattle were wading ashore. Most of the cowpunchers met them.

The San Carlos cook had sterilized old Lige Cutter's bullet-ripped shoulder with whiskey, bathed and bandaged the flesh wound that had left no broken bones. Old Lige, working on hot whiskey, was a little drunk.

Pecos Saunders had blinked his eyes open and come alive. The first thing he managed to whisper was, "Where's Lige Cutter?"

"Right here, Pecos. Take 'er easy. You got dampish."

"This calls for a drunk, Lige. You saved my life."

"Not me. It was Jack Kibby saved the two of us."

"Kibby?"

"Don't thank me," grinned Kibby. "I was protectin' my own int'rests. I'd play hell gettin' the name of Saunders MacDougall on the pay-off check if I let him drown. I was workin' from a selfish standpoint, you Scotch robber."

Old Lige shook his grizzled white head. He figured he was drunker than he should be.

"Saunders MacDougall," he muttered. "Don't make sense."

Kibby looked a little puzzled now. The San Carlos rep grinned.

"I was usin' a Scot's canny caution, Lige. If Sam Peacock or his outfit or you had known I was the big dog with the brass collar it might have cramped somebody's style, so I figured. So I told my men to call me Pecos, like they do down in Texas. And I told Sam Peacock I was Pecos Saunders, tally rep for the San Carlos outfit. I reckon he had Fox feel me out on a bribe. When it didn't work, he got tough. Or mebbyso Fox played that tally book thing lone handed. Anyhow we know how it worked out. Scotch Pecos Saunders MacDougall pays off on your own range count, Kibby."

BIG JACK KIBBY grinned flatly. There was a cold twinkle in his ice blue eyes. He took a damp looking wallet from his sodden coat that was drying near the open fire.

There was a thick sheaf of hundred dollar bills in the wallet. Twenty of those hundred dollar bills, held together by a rubber band. Kibby tossed them in old Lige's lap.

"From Nate Kline, Lige. Birthday present. I'm doublin' it. Here's Nate's

letter. I'll read it, your one good hand bein' filled with a cup of likker. Here's what he says:

"My good friend Lige," Kirby read aloud. "Just a little birthday present from Grandma and Mama and the kids. At Pasadena in California is an orange ranch I got for them. Grandma and the kids, they like to walk out of the house and pick the oranges right off the trees in the yard. So I got oranges for them. And for Mama she'll have flowers. We don't like sheep neither.

"Kibby says if you can pick oranges maybe from a horse, you will like it. So anyhow for Christmas Grandma and Mama and the kids are expecting you. Ask at the depot for the ticket. It's free, Lige. First class in the sleeper. And meals in the diner. Not a caboose at the end of cattle cars, Lige.

"About the count on the Rafter K cattle. Kibby and I talked it over. Use that range count we got on the cattle. When Nate Kline finishes with the cattle business he finishes fair and square and no monkey business like that Sam Peacock likes. And anyhow, Lige, there is a joke about Scotland being the only place on earth where a Jew can't make a living. And from Scotland comes Saunders MacDougall's father and he is a chip off that Scotch block. Tell him that joke for Nate Kline, Lige. And don't let nobody like that Kibby fool you. Tough he might be on the outside, but on the inside he's got a big enough heart to fit the size of the rest of him, even his big feet. . . ."

Kibby's beefy face reddened.

"I had a talk with Kibby and he don't like sheep either. So we are taking that offer Saunders MacDougall is making for his San Carlos Cattle Company, for the horses and land and the whole Rafter K ranch. Everything. They will put in alfalfa and feeding pens. Handle only beef cattle on the Rafter K range. I have already told Saunders MacDougall he needs a Montana beef man with experience. And that's Lige Cutter.

"But that he can't get you cheap. Hold out, Lige, for a salary that will loosen up them Scotchmen's bankroll. Five hundred a month, Lige, is dirt cheap. Not a penny less. And two weeks holiday every Christmas. Grandma and the kids put that into the contract. For oranges, Lige. And to see the flowers. From Mama, that comes. And from your old friend Nate Kline, Lige, comes best regards and good luck."

Lige's puckered blue eyes were misted. He said something about the campfire smoke in a man's eyes.

"Five hundred," grinned Pecos Saunders MacDougall, "and a few shares of stock in the San Carlos Cattle Company. Your pay starts now. But we don't start work, Lige, till we get ready."

Jack Kibby folded the letter and handed it to Lige Cutter. His voice was a little husky.

"The whitest pardner any man ever had, Nate Kline. That's why I'm goin' to California where I can have him handy. Horse racing in California beats sheep in Montana. I'm closing a deal for a big race track not too far from Nate's orange ranch."

Big Jack Kibby took the empty tin cups from Pecos and old Lige and filled them from the keg, filling a third cup for himself. He stood there, legs spread, big as a grizzly, and motioned for all the Rafter K and San Carlos cowpunchers to fill their cups.

"To the old Rafter K outfit," Kibby raised his filled cup, "and the new Rafter K. To every man in both outfits. And Nate Kline would want me to include even Fox and Peacock. Drink 'er down!"

THE END

The best—and the toughest—critic of Western fiction on earth is your professional working cowpuncher—the man who can't be fooled! That's why you'll find that these authentic cattle-range stories by Walt Coburn rate tops among the men who make their living with rope and saddle! Don't miss Walt's forthcoming novel—a great story of a boothill decoy! Buy the May issue April 2nd!

★ ★ DUKE BAGLEY'S

By WILLIAM R. COX

Duke knelt there, saying, "Got him, Poglise! Right in the guts!"

Wiley Duke Bagley, traveling trouble - shooter, had savvy enough to mind his own business when he witnessed that fatal Lazy T gun-duel. . . . It was too bad that he didn't also have the savvy to steer clear of Saddle—where a town-full of tough gun - hands were waiting to nominate Duke for the murderer's noose!

CHAPTER ONE

The Lazy T Killing

"My love has a gun, but that gun he won't use,
He's quit his gun-fighting, and also his booze!
He's sold him his saddle, his spurs and his rope
There's no more cow-punching—

GALLOWS RENDEZVOUS

Smashing Novel of Hangtown Killers

and that's what I hope!"

THE singer elevated a long-necked bottle labelled "Blue Grass Bourbon Whiskey" and took a long swig. The big black horse ambled down over the shale of the hillside towards the ranchhouse which nestled in the green valley. "A hell of a song!" rumbled the rider. "Shouldn't sing it, Petey. No! No, indeed!"

He was an oversized man, clad in gay-colored flannel shirt, a crimson rebosa, five-gallon hat and stiff bull-hide chaps. His boots were embroidered with silken thread. His nose was like the prow of a ship, only blowzy, and his leonine mane was carefully tended. He had the air and bearing of an important person, but slightly on the crooked side.

The black horse, Petey, cocked his ears forward, sliding a little on the loose shale. Duke Bagley said, "Whoa, you long-legged son of a mule! Gettin' to be more

scarey than I am! This here is Texas, you black limb of Satan! My old home state! We don't have to run and hide here in Texas. Anything goes in this wonderful country!"

Down below the smoke curled lazily from the chimney of the adobe ranch-house. Near the corral two men stood facing one another. It was too far away for the Duke to distinguish them as individuals, except that one was much taller than the other, but there was no mistaking their action.

The Duke breathed, "By gum, Petey, you were right! This is none of our business!"

The taller man was stepping back, making his draw. The shorter did not move his feet, but his hands seemed very quick, and the Duke peered anxiously. Yes, that was a gunman's swivel draw and the man was fanning his weapon. The faint echo of the shots rattled around the hills. The taller man stumbled and fell over, clutching his middle.

The other stood stock still. Then he reached into his pocket with his left hand, stooped and placed something upon the chest of the fallen man. Then he walked around the corner of the house and disappeared. There was no one else in sight, apparently.

The Duke said, "Get goin', Petey! Yaas! Yaas, indeed. Fine country, Texas. . . . If a man minds his own business!"

Nevertheless, approaching the town of Saddle, it was impossible not to note the brand Lazy T on the cattle which belonged to that adobe ranch. And as the Duke always knew the lay of any land which he attempted to enter, it was thrust upon him that the dead man out near the corral was probably Pat Hurdee.

Ahead on the trail a horseman rode hard, cleaning and reloading his six-shooter as he went. That man was the killer.

"Trouble is, a man knows too much, he opens his mouth," muttered the Duke. "Gets into things unprofitable. All I want's a little place of my own—say with four faro tables, a coupla poker rooms, a roulette layout, a bar about two hundred feet long and plenty customers. . . ."

Petey turned his head around.

The Duke said, "Waal? So maybe not such a little place! I could buy a big one, with the money in this belt!"

He was carrying plenty of cash. Things had been good with the Duke. If it were not for his slightly spotted past, and his ever-exciting present he could easily buy himself a saloon in Texas. Truthfully, he needed but one table—for poker. His long, amazingly slim white hands were encased in gloves—they could do marvels with a deck of angel backs! He took good care of those hands.

The road made a bend around a hillock of sandstone. Mesquite ran thick, then the soil showed rich and bare where a nester had his shack and his plough and his wife and brood.

The Duke frowned. He would never get over the old cattle days, the days of the Ace of Clubs Association, when, after the War Between the States, the cowmen had ridden down their enemies. Gambler, prowler in strange lands and alleys, bon vivant of the Eastern towns, and Mississippi bravo—he was always in his heart a longhorn man.

Another rider appeared, this time coming eastward. Duke reined aside politely. Petey stopped dead and pricked his ears straight up. Duke's gloved hand swept his hat from his head. The rider was a woman, a blonde and fair as the Texas morning.

She was riding a blooded roan mare, side saddle. She wore a green habit, and her shoulders filled the jacket. She was not young, but not too old. Her curves were exquisite.

Duke's rather prominent eyeballs bugged out. He called. "Good morning to you, my lovely little turtle dove! Is this the road to Saddle?"

The roan mare stopped. From under the straight-brimmed beaver hat, blue eyes as cold and sharp as icicles surveyed the Duke. The woman's voice was low and husky, "You know damn well it's the road to Saddle. Where's Pat Hurdee—that's what I want to know."

"Aha!" cried Duke. "Inimical! Yaas, yaas indeed, an inimical blonde. . . . Who is Pat Hurdee?" He watched her, masking his own eyes with drooping lids which gave him the appearance of a fat buzzard on a big horse.

"Don't you work for Pat?" she snapped.

"Work?" queried Duke mildly. "Work? My dear little creature, you are sadly in error when you apply. . . ."

"Then look out, you big fat fool!" said the woman furiously. The roan started under the spur, leaping past Petey. The woman rode like an Amazon, Duke thought, staring after her.

She was tough, too. Duke was willing to bet that even the dead body of Pat Hurdee out beside the corral, would not disturb nor shock her. If it was Pat Hurdee who lay in the dirt back there. It had been tall enough for the old boy, and Pat was always one to be brawling, back in the old Ace of Clubs days.

*

DUKE rode on to the town. It was better not to think about the old Ace of Clubs crowd, at that. There had been a little matter of the horse which had not belonged to Duke, but which he had ridden several miles before they caught up with him. Hoke Stuart had about saved Duke's neck that dismal day. It was an episode which rankled in Duke's raddled memory. He had not really meant to steal that bronc. . . .

Saddle was evidently a prosperous, orderly, amazingly well-built town for the '80's. It had the true Texan one-street layout, but there was a neat Mexican section to the south, several bungalows spotted around to the north, and evidently only one saloon, which was called the Jaybird.

As Duke pretended to tie Petey to the hitching rail—Petey would stand any time without hitching, another rider came up from the east. He was a tall, slim young man with deeply tanned features and cold gray eyes. He wore two guns, tied low.

He nodded curtly to Duke and said, "Howdy. Happen to know Pat Hurdee? I'd like to find him, pronto."

Duke said, "I'm a stranger here myself. Could I proffer a slight libation to a fellow traveler?"

The tall youth lit from the rangy cayuse with its marks of travel. He was, Duke noted, not too young, at that. He moved gracefully and purposefully towards the Jaybird. "Name of Stuart. Ned Stuart."

Duke introduced himself and they entered the large place. Behind the bar were gleaming rows of glasses and two bartenders with cow-licks laden with bear grease. At two faro tables sat dealers with nimble fingers. A roulette wheel was getting a desultory play from a lean cowboy or two.

In back was a hall, with rooms for poker. Duke gulped and sighed. It was the perfect establishment of his dreams. There was not even any competition, and Saddle seemed a prosperous town.

A large man, fatter than the Duke, came forward. He said in lordly manner, "First drink is on the house, gents. Welcome to Saddle!" He was dressed in a frock coat and white shirt and his boots were polished. He had pig eyes and his name was Rigger Rice. He owned the Jaybird. Duke almost choked with envy.

"Bourbon!" roared Duke. "A bottle, not a drink!" He poured a couple of gold pieces on the mahogany. "And I'll pay for it, thank ye, sir. The Duke always pays!"

One of the cowpunchers, a seamy-faced man, turned from the roulette wheel. He spoke to his companion, a fresh-faced youth. They both looked long and hard at the Duke.

Rigger Rice was saying, "Got a nice little town. Run things right, here. Give you all the gamble you want, but keep it clean. Yessir, Pat Hurdee runs this town and we're all mighty proud of him and Saddle!"

Rigger Rice was one of those who talks a lot and says nothing, Duke determined. From the back a couple of men sauntered into the bar.

Rigger introduced them as Faro Joe and Slide Kelley. A slightly cross-eyed fellow called Bojo Hale joined them. Duke had never seen a more unsavory trio, yet they were all well-attired and mannerly, drinking Duke's whiskey.

A pleasant hour passed. Ned Stuart, the young stranger, said little or nothing. Duke finished the bottle. The tall cowman's name was Ed Poglise, Rigger Rice volunteered, and he was Pat's foreman. The younger lad was Kid Beatty, who also worked for the Lazy T.

"We got prosperous nesters," boasted Rice. "We got a small mine or two out

yonder. We got mountains, valleys, rivers, and by God, we got a bit of desert! You name it, men. We got it around Saddle!"

Ned Stuart's hard voice said, "Where do you keep this man, Hurdee?"

There was something in Stuart's voice which made Duke frown. Of all the men present in the Jaybird, Stuart alone seemed solid.

Rigger Rice was a fat, oily enigma. The three cohorts were sly villains. The two cowpunchers were hard-bitten, silent. Stuart wore his guns handy and talked straight when he spoke.

Before anyone could answer the doors banged open. Skirts swished and the blonde woman of the trail came swiftly forward. Her eyes blazed about, fastened upon Poglise, the Lazy T foreman.

She snapped in her husky voice, "Pat Hurdee's dead!"

The silence was like a lull after the storm. Poglise had a jaw like granite, and his cat's eyes slanted viciously. He took a step towards Rigger Rice, then wheeled and said something inaudible to his companion. Both swung for the door.

The woman said, "Shot twice. Once in the back!"

Duke blinked. Everyone started babbling at once. Rigger Rice despatched his men for the marshal. There was a turmoil which drained the bar of everyone save Ned Stuart, the blonde woman and Duke.

The woman came forward and poured herself a drink from Duke's bottle. Out of the corner of her mouth she muttered, "If you did it, sit tight. I'll alibi you. I was headin' his way myself, on a little matter." She faced the young stranger and said aloud, "Drink up. My name's Fanny Dare. I'm partners in this joint. You're pretty handsome, young fella! I think I'm goin' to like you!"

Ned Stuart's face was perfectly blank. He was staring off into space. His assurance was gone and the corners of his hard mouth twitched. At last he turned and looked at Fanny Dare without seeing her. He said flatly, "Someone saved me a job. But there goes five thousand dollars."

"Hoke Stuart!" said Duke triumphantly. "I knew it! Yaas. Yaas, indeed! You're Hoke's boy. Knew him well—fine a man as ever drew breath!"

Ned said, "Yeah. Hoke was my pa. . . . Tell me somethin', Miss Dare. Was there anything unusual around Pat Hurdee's body? Anything—like a message?"

Fanny Dare said, "Only this." She dropped a piece of pasteboard on the bar. It was a crumpled ace of clubs.

Ned Stuart sucked in his breath. From his own pocket he produced a similar card. He laid it beside the other. It was a bicycle-backed, red card. The two were identical.

"Someone beat me to it, all right," Ned said. "Someone from the old crowd."

"I'm sorry for his daughter," said Fanny abruptly. "She'll be in on the stage tonight."

But Duke was thinking about the five thousand dollars mentioned by Ned Stuart. He was remembering the old tale that Pat Hurdee had run off with the treasury of the Ace of Clubs Association, and with Hoke's girl, Mary Reed. And that because of Mary, Hoke had repaid the money, although it had crippled him.

Hoke evidently had never come back. He had found another girl, because here was his son, twenty-five years later. But the son looked like he needed money. . . . Duke recognized all the signs of poverty, having been accustomed to it himself quite often.

Duke muttered, "Mind your own business, you old fool! What if Hoke did save your neck? Keep outa this local row!" But his mind ran over and over the fact that Hurdee had been shot again, in the back, after the Duke had seen him go down under the fire of the short man who had out-drawn him. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Duke Goes to Town

PAT HURDEE had been a good man, Saddle agreed, waiting for the stage which would bring his orphaned daughter. Under the impetus of his energy, the town had grown and prospered. The bank was started by Pat, the nesters conciliated and made good, tax-paying citizens.

Mayor Rigger Rice was an honest businessman, efficient in office. Whoever had killed Pat would surely hang, without

benefit of trial, if Marshal Jim Gunner caught him.

Of course, Jim wasn't right bright; he was just a gun-throwing, game officer. But someone would turn up the killer. It didn't stand to reason he should escape.

Unfortunately, no one knew just when Pat had been shot. Several men had ridden into town that afternoon. The posse picked up tracks going into the mountains, too, but nothing was stolen, no cattle run off. The Lazy T yard crew was in town; Poglise and the Kid sent them in, and themselves followed.

It was a mystery, all right. Saddle buzzed with it. Duke Bagley, comfortably outside another bottle of bourbon—this one on the house—listened carefully.

At his side was the perplexed and doleful Ned Stuart. The lad was broke, and Duke was loaded with gold coins, thanks to a couple of little deals in the immediate past—slightly shady deals, but highly profitable for the Duke.

An inner voice advised Duke to blow the town. Rigger Rice not only owned the Jaybird, that lovely place, but he was mayor. Jim Gunner was not bright, but he had the peace officer's instinctive distrust of Duke Bagley—a condition familiar enough to the Duke. Yet when the stage came in, Duke and Ned Stuart were back in the crowd, watching Fanny Dare nervously greet the girl who descended to the dusty street and murky tragedy.

She was a small, slim girl, with dark eyes in a white face. She had a helpless air, and the oppression of the mourning crowd which surged about her seemed to wilt her to a fragment of femininity. The tall blonde Fanny towered over her, trying to lead her to the hotel. There was an escort of Ed Poglise and the Kid and Rigger Rice. The town trailed out behind this entourage. Duke and Ned watched them go.

Ned said abruptly, "She's plumb beautiful! How c'n she be the daughter of that ornery old thief?"

"Shhh!" said the Duke. "You wanta get strung up? They suspect us now!"

Stuart blinked.

The Duke went on, "The bank ain't in such good shape. Rigger is holdin' notes, signed by Pat Hurdee. There are six or eight men coulda killed him, but strangers will be suspected. My young fire-eater, if we had good sense, we would away from these here parts!"

"Then that—that girl, his daughter. She'll be in bad shape!" said Stuart.

"Alas!" sighed Duke. "Let us have a small libation."

"No," said Stuart abruptly. "I'm goin' down to the hotel and get settled and cleaned a bit." He strode off.

"Smitten!" mourned the Duke. "Yaas, indeed! Love at first sight! Pat Hurdee's daughter an' Hoke Stuart's son. Shades of the old Ace of Clubs!"

He made a pass with one of his thin, white hands and the two ancient, crumpled cards appeared. He studied them for a moment, then put them away. He started back for the saloon. . . .

He was still there when the posse came back, empty-handed and empty-headed. There was no trail into the hills, Jim Gunner admitted, stroking his silky mustaches. The marshal looked like an old beagle, Duke chuckled to himself, only without that much sense.

Rigger Rice said, "Well, this was Pat's night to play poker. How about a sorta testimonial game in his honor!"

Duke went outside. It was growing dark and his gregarious and avid soul demanded that he join the poker players. But his caution and good sense told him to prowl.

He went down to the hotel and took a room, but there was no sign of Ned Stuart until he poked his head into a small back parlor. There he found Ned and the bereaved girl, sitting close together on a small couch. The girl's large eyes were upon Ned's and they were oblivious to the presence of the Duke.

The Duke went out and saw that Petey was all right in the stable. The black horse nuzzled him, grateful for his oats and the nice rest he was getting. Duke murmured, "This ain't shapin' up good at all, Petey. When they don't find a killer, people allus suspect strangers. I feel uncomfortable. Shoulda taken another drink of that whiskey!"

As he left the barn, a tall figure accosted him. "Bagley!"

The Duke's .45 was in his hand in some mysterious fashion, dangling carelessly, but cocked. He said, "Hello, Ed Poglise."

The foreman said, "You kilt him, Bagley!"

"Nope," said Duke pleasantly. "It was a short man. I was too far away to know anything more'n that. Shot him in the belly."

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ANOTHER figure moved forward. It was Fanny Dare, and she shouldered Ed Poglise away. She said, "He was killed by a shot in the back. The one from in front went into his belly, but he was lying straight and flat. Nobody hit in the belly lies that way. They double up in a heap."

Duke said, "You must've seen your share, my little chickadee! Why didn't I hear the other shot?"

He told them where he had been when he saw Pat Hurdee go down. There was no use to conceal it from these two wise characters, he thought. He was in it, now. He couldn't leave Ned Stuart, whose father had saved him from hanging.

When he had finished, the woman said, "You could have shot him, with a rifle. I could have shot him and doubled back to cover up."

Poglise growled, "It's a damned, bloody mystery. Cora will lose the ranch while we putter aroun'."

"Everybody's just plumb friendly and peaceable," said Fanny. "Pat owed me money, and more. The town is tottering because Pat never could get straight. Rigger'll own us; all of us. . . ."

"I still think Bagley coulda done it," muttered Poglise.

Duke sighed. He said, "Doubt and indecision are things to be abandoned. Action is called for. My little blonde turtle dove, will you take my arm and repair to the Jaybird?"

"What you goin' to do?" scowled Poglise.

"Start something, my fine scowling friend," said the Duke. "Upset this complacency. Get the monkeys into the open. Saddle begins to bore me. . . .

"Jim Gunner'll bore you—with lead," promised Poglise. "He's the fastest man west of the Pecos with them weapons!"

The Duke drew little red balls from his vest pocket. He juggled them in the light from the hotel windows. They made leaping little arcs with unbelievable rapidity. They nestled into his hand, between his long fingers, became four in number, then three, then two, then only one red ball.

He said, "Yaas! Yaas, indeed. The poker game, now—in honor of the late Pat Hurdee!"

He strutted beside Fanny Dare. She was almost as tall as he and walked with a free, swinging stride. She was quite a woman, the Duke admitted to himself. The finest figure he had seen in years. But she was Rigger Rice's partner.

Warning bells sounded inside his mind, but the Duke went on. He was seldom sentimental, but Hoke Stuart had been a fine man, and there was something about Hoke's son. . . .

Inside the hotel, that young man was saying, "There must be enough stock to sell out for a profit. Now, I got a little spread over in East Texas. . . ."

Cora Hurdee said, "Why, Mr. Stuart! I hardly know you! What are you talking about?"

"Your maw was Mary Reed," said Ned stubbornly. "When pa died, he told me to search for Mary Reed's daughter. . . ."

The girl looked steadily at him. She said, "That is a big lie! He told you to look for Pat Hurdee, who stole Mary Reed from him! I know about Hoke Stuart."

Ned flushed. He said, "There was a small matter—I need some money to up my stock a little. . . ."

"Five thousand dollars," nodded this wisp of a girl coolly. "Father drew it out of the bank yesterday. It was stolen before he could get it ready for you. Father meant to repay Hoke's son."

Ned said, "How do you know all this?"

"Ed Poglise told me," she said. "While you were shaving. Ed won't tell anyone else, because he wants to locate that five thousand dollars, first. He don't want anyone to move away with it. The marshal's dumb. Ed thinks he can find the murderer."

Ned said, "Oh."

"It's your money," the girl said gravely. "But Rigger holds a note for it. Ed wants it for me. Of course I'd have to give it to Rigger Rice. . . . Or lose the Lazy T."

Ned said, "Why, of course. I don't want your money!"

They sat and looked at one another. Time passed very swiftly. When the shots sounded in the street, they started, and Ned was a minute later than he might otherwise have been, in getting to the scene.

The crowd came boiling out of the Jaybird. Two men in the van strove to fight loose from those who restrained them. The looming figure of the Duke was momentarily stopped by the clutches of Slide Kelley and Rigger Rice. Then he broke away, and his gun whipped up.

Over to one side, a man lay on the walk, struggling for breath. The crowd suddenly disintegrated, running in all directions, seeking cover, as the other man got

"Right!" said Duke. "But you let him sneak-draw on you."

"Thought—thought I could beat him to it," gasped Poglise. "Pat—first—an' now me. . . . What's to become of—Cora?"

"Don't worry," said Ned grimly.

But Poglise looked shrewdly at Duke. He said, "I remember you, Bagley. Old Ace of Clubs. Take—care—of things. . . ."

That was the end of Ed Poglise, who for love of Mary Reed had followed the fortunes of Pat Hurdee. Ned took a breath of night air and said, "What's the score, Duke?"

"Faro Joe slipped an ace—clumsier than he ought," said the Duke rapidly. "Instead of droppin' out of the hand, Poglise went on the prod. But Faro Joe had a hide-out derringer and let go both

WHILE HITLER LAUGHS!

"They machine-gunned the boats after our tanker sunk. . . . I came up in a sea of blazing oil; my lungs were bursting, but I managed to make it underwater to a clear place. . . . I tried to reach the bos'n, but he went down. . . ." That's when you realize that taxes aren't enough—when you want to top that 10% quota, and—BUY *MORE* U. S. WAR-SAVINGS BONDS!

loose. It was Faro Joe, and he was already firing. Bullets sang down the street, missing the Duke by inches. The big man, standing straight up, lowered the muzzle of his .45 with infinite calm. Ned cursed, snapping both his weapons into his hands, stalking towards the scene, stiff-legged, like an angry bull pup.

He shouted, "Make this clean! Give Duke his chance!"

Nobody seemed to want to play. Faro Joe tried to sidestep and get in one more shot. The Duke pressed the hair-trigger of his fine, pearl-handed gun.

Faro Joe's step became a small dance. Then the nerves of his body ceased to function and he stopped and doubled over. His head hit the ground and he kicked out his breath. People came from hiding, one by one.

But Ned was bending over the dying man on the walk. It was hard, to see the way he fought for life and breath.

Duke knelt there, saying, "Got him, Poglise! Right in the guts."

"He slicked—the—ace . . ." gasped the Lazy T foreman.

barrels. Then I called him—and now the marshal will call me. Rigger Rice is eliminatin' us politely. Ned, you duck and take the girl to the ranch. See if you can learn anything from Pat's papers. . . ."

"They'll sure kill you next!" said Ned.

"They'll sure play hell at it!" said Duke. "Go on!"

Ned regretfully retreated. The crowd around Faro Joe split away and Marshal Jim Gunner, his face blank but serious, came forward. Ned slid along in the shadows to where Cora waited. In five minutes he had her on a horse and was heading for the ranch.

Halfway out, Kid Beatty overtook them, half-sober, weeping with rage at the death of the foreman, but declaring that "thet big fat feller run me out of town!"

"What's he doing now?" demanded Ned.

"Him and that blonde Fanny are drinkin' whiskey with Rigger!" said the youth. "They're a bunch o' crooks!"

A faint flicker of doubt ran through Ned. What if the Duke was a crook? What if he threw in with Rice to get the

Lazy T away from Cora? Ned had only Duke's word that he was an old friend of Hoke Stuart.

They rode faster. Cora was weeping quietly. Ned slipped his guns around within handy reach and rode rear guard, watching for an attack from behind. He had forgotten all about his five thousand dollar stake, for which he had journeyed to Saddle. He now wanted only to protect Cora from the world!

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RIGGER RICE'S pig eyes were like buttons of glass, but he pretended to be neutral. Jim Gunner kept saying, "Bagley chipped in, didn't he? It wasn't his fight!"

"Faro slicked the ace!" said Fanny. "Anyone in the game had a right to take him."

Duke wisely joined Rigger in saying nothing. Gunner was stupid enough to argue, so that was all right. The famed gun-thrower would take his orders from Rice. Duke was beginning to understand about Rigger Rice and Saddle, now.

The fat man never gave orders. He only made suggestions, which somehow always got carried out. He was the quiet type—and trebly dangerous. In the background, Slide Kelley and Bojo Hale were equally reticent. Various citizens stood about and listened without comment.

Duke drew out his red balls and juggled absently, unaware that he was stealing the show. Rice's gaze became contemplative.

Jim Gunner said loudly, "What you takin' up this stranger's fight fer, Fanny? He come in past the Lazy T! He coulda shot Pat Hurdee!"

The citizens gave voice, then. It was like a baying pack of hounds. Things were getting hot. Duke stuffed the balls away in his pocket. Dumb Jim Gunner had accidentally hit the right note to make Duke the wrong one.

Fanny blazed, "I was talkin' to Bagley on the trail when Hurdee must've been getting his!"

There was one moment of silence while they digested this lie. Into it Rigger Rice's voice came calm and cool. "Besides, I'll need a new houseman and Bagley is the man I want. You wouldn't want to spoil my game, would you, Gunner?" Rigger's laugh was a shrill falsetto, phoney as lead coins, but it had its effect.

Gunner's mustaches drooped. He said, "Well. . . . if you an' Fanny both stand in for him. . . ."

It was as simple as that. Duke admired the man tremendously. He knew just when to throw his weight in there. The tension was dissipated on the spot.

Gunner took a big drink and stomped out to look for Pat Hurdee's killer in the Mexican quarter where they feared him. The citizens buzzed about the killings. It was a long time since peaceful Saddle had seen shootings in its streets.

In a small back room, Fanny and Rigger sat while Duke drank bourbon. Rice's oily accents said, "Whoever killed Hurdee got his money. Too bad you weren't closer, Bagley. If you could only give us some idea. . . ."

Duke said, "None of my business. No, indeed! Not at the time. Feel sorry for the gal, Pat's daughter."

Fanny said, "The Ace of Clubs must mean something."

"It was an old Ku Klux outfit," said Rice reflectively. "Hurdee belonged to it. But no one else here. . . ."

"Except Ed Poglise," said Duke softly. "He was in it with Pat. Ed was crazy about Mary Reed—everyone was, in those days. He followed Pat out here to watch over her."

"Poglise, eh?" Rice was frankly admiring. "Hang it on a dead man! But what about that five thousand dollars?"

Duke shrugged. "Never be found. The Lazy T is yours, Rigger. What more you want, my slick-tongued friend?"

Rigger sat silent, like a fat spider. Fanny said abruptly, "Take me home, Bagley. I'm dog tired."

The mayor of Saddle scarcely seemed to notice them as they left. There was a side alley and Fanny shivered in the night breeze. She lived not far from the Jay Bird, in a small neat, white house on a side street. Duke went onto the porch and held the door for her.

Then he stepped down and whispered, "Go through and open the back. I want to talk."

He did not wait for a reply. He walked

back down the street to the hotel. He saw the man dodging about, following him. He went into the front of the hotel and out the back.

There was another man out back. The first followed through. They were Slide Kelley and Bojo Hale. Friends of Mr. Faro Joe, of course. If anything happened, it would be on account of they essayed revenge for their departed cohort. Rigger Rice had saved the appearance of a lynching and learned everything Duke had been willing to tell him. He had ascertained that the murder of Hurdee could be planted upon Poglise. Now he could do without Duke Bagley. . . .

There was, unfortunately, only one door to the stable. There was a loft, however. Several horses moved in the other stalls. Duke slipped the halter on each of them. They backed out one by one, neighing a little. And Petey did not take to them. He bit the nearest on the flank.

The affronted steed bolted. He went through the door with two others close behind. Petey promptly bit another, while Duke clambered the loft-ladder, to keep out of the way of flying hoofs.

He could depend upon Petey to be the last, he thought. He called softly. Petey came near the ladder. Duke lowered his bulk to the horse's broad back. He drew his pearl-handled Colt .45 and held it ready. He kicked Petey gently in the ribs and they rode out on the tail of the procession.

Lights came up. There were calls of alarm from the hotel owner. Shots were fired. Duke leaned over close to Petey's neck and said, "Run, my little sidewheeling fool! Run like hell and duck among the bullets!"

Petey ran. They skidded around the corner of the building. Slide Kelley ran, squinting, to make sure it was Duke. From afar, Bojo Hale's voice called, "He's yours, Slide!"

Kelley's gun went up. Duke grunted, sliding forward, protecting himself as best he could on the far side of Petey's leaping body. He lined up on Kelley and let go with the .45, not hoping for a hit, but trying for time. He missed, but the scream of his heavy slug drove Kelley to cover. One of the running horses got between them.

DUKE swerved, guiding Petey short about a corner. They started east and the hue and cry was behind them. They turned in a circle and came back into town on a dark side street. There was a shed behind the white house and the mare whinnied as Petey slid in beside her.

Duke said, "Behave yourself, sir! And keep quiet!" But he found a lump of sugar for the black horse and another for the roan mare. Then he slipped across the yard to the rear door of Fanny Dare's house.

It was open. Duke went through the kitchen, fumbling his way. He dared not strike a light. He called in a whisper, "Fanny! Where are you, my little chickadee?"

The woman's cool voice said, "Right here. I've got a gun on you, and I'm waitin'."

She was in a chair near the window. Duke found a settee against the wall and groaned, lowering his bulk. "The lack of faith among the people of this town amazes me! Yaas, indeed! You wouldn't happen to possess a small bottle of bourbon, my little blonde chum, would you, now?"

She said, "Why did you come to Saddle, Bagley?"

Duke said, "I sure need that drink. . . . Why did you chip in and help me, my beauteous blonde angel?"

She said, "You were one of that Ace of Clubs crowd. Who else in this town belonged to it?"

"That's the woman of it," complained Duke. "Always askin', never answerin'. . . . Yaas, I was an Ace of Clubs cohort, many years ago. Poglise was one. And Pat Hurdee. They are now quite dead."

"Who else?" she demanded.

"I've not recognized another," sighed Duke. "I—er—departed a year before the Ace gang was broken up. Could be any man over forty. Rigger Rice. . . ?

He paused. She was Rice's partner. He needed to know where she stood.

Fanny said flatly, "Rigger fleeced me out of my share of the Jay Bird. He and Pat Hurdee got me in a blackjack game. We were drinking wine. When I sobered up, I knew what had happened and went after Pat first. He was dead. Now

Rigger is ready to give me back my share —on certain terms."

Duke said, "*Ah-hh!* So my little blonde pardner needs help? She is not enamored of big, bad Rigger Rice!"

"You fat tramp, Jim Gunner would kill Rigger like shooting fish in a barrel—" She stopped suddenly.

Duke whistled under his breath. He said, "Jim Gunner, eh? He loves you dearly, no doubt?"

Fanny said, "Never mind that. Did they try to gun you when you left here?"

"Of course!" said the Duke. "But I had to get my hoss. Petey is a very fine animal. Now I shall be forced to spend the night in the open, upon the lone prairie, with one eye open. Yaas, indeed. And without whiskey."

"Then what?" she demanded.

"Then, in daylight, I shall seek out Mr. Rigger Rice," said Duke thoughtfully. "That girl—Ned Stuart—and now my little Fanny—have all been taken by Mr. Rice. It shall be my endeavor to salvage something from the wreckage."

"And what do you get out of it?" she said bluntly.

In the darkness Duke waved his hand. "Perhaps satisfaction. Perhaps justification for some pecadilloes of my past. . . ."

"How much cash? I want to know," she said.

"Let us leave that to fate, and have a little trust in one another," said Duke injuredly. "You are over-hard, my blondined big gal!"

"I'm not blondined! It's natural!" she stormed. "You fat, ugly nincompoop, you know I've got to put you up here tonight! You'll take that room behind you, and I'm locking you in and sleeping with this gun! And by Joseph Smith, if you cross me in this, I'll have Jim Gunner let daylight through you. I want my money—and I want that kid Cora Hurdee to get a break, but I don't trust you on any grounds, Bagley!"

"Then why not call Gunner now?" asked Duke sweetly.

"Saddle was a peaceful, prosperous town," she said. "I liked it here. People treat me good. I got a position here. They know me, know I'm straight, see? Maybe Hurdee and Rigger tricked the elections and stuff—still, the gambling was fairly honest and Saddle was always cleaner'n most places.

"Now Rigger's turned his wolf loose. There's been killings. That Ace of Clubs business. . . . I want it stopped. You're a slicker. You've killed your share. It's written on you. No matter how lousy you are, you've showed against Rigger and for Cora Hurdee. I'm calling on you to go through!"

She produced a large brass key. She indicated the door behind Duke, and he went into a small but comfortable bedroom, quite lacey and feminine. She closed the door and locked it.

For once the Duke had nothing to say. He sat down, lighting a small lamp. The shades were tightly drawn, and of course no one would be looking for him in this place. He took out the red balls and juggled them for some moments without a break.

When he had found out who must have killed Pat Hurdee, he stopped juggling.

He took from his pocket an instrument he had invented himself. It was a handy thing of fine steel, hand-made by a certain craftsman in St. Louis. It had many uses, one of which was the opening of old-fashioned locks with large keys. He inserted it in the hole and turned his wrist.

He went down the hall to the bedroom which must be Fanny's and stood outside the door.

He said, "No use to shoot me, Fanny. I just thought you'd like to know that I've figgered who killed Pat, and all we got to do is locate the money he had on him. What kinda money was it?"

She said, "Damn you! It was gold and scrip . . . *my* scrip! From that blackjack game. And a draft from the bank which he had borrowed that day."

Duke said, "Pleasant dreams, my little doveling! And—don't ever lock up an old lovesmith!"

CHAPTER THREE

Card of Death

THERE was nothing wrong with the Lazy T outfit, Ned Stuart decided. Kid Beatty rode with him all that day, and Ned saw enough to prove that the cattle were fat and healthy, that the

calves were coming along fine, that the range and water were good, and unchallenged by ambitious neighbors. Only Pat Hurdee's predeliction for cards and liquor, Kid Beatty hinted, had placed the Lazy T in precarious circumstances.

Rigger Rice held the notes. Pat had decided to pay off Ned Stuart's claim after he heard of Hoke Stuart's death. He had gone to town, drawn the money and returned to await Ned's arrival. He had been ready to confess wrongdoing and to make amends, Cora said.

What she did not add was that she had read a last letter from Hoke, before he died, telling that he wanted to leave his son with a chance in life and that the five thousand dollars meant much to him. Would Pat please, for the sake of Mary Reed, repay his obligation?

And Cora had gone to work on her father until she beat him down and made him promise. . . .

"It's Rigger Rice," said Ned. "He knew your father had the money. He was probably on the note."

He went out near the corral and examined the terrain where Pat Hurdee had met his death. Duke Bagley had said that the gunman he had seen was "much shorter than Hurdee." But Pat Hurdee had been six feet, six inches tall. Duke had been too far away to identify the assailant.

And if the rifle shot had killed Hurdee, it must have come from somewhere south of Bagley's position. Ned rode his hostess's best horse up a hill and found plenty of outcroppings or rock which could have shielded the rifleman. But he could find no betraying tracks in this ground.

He came back down the hill to the ranch. Cora was wearing a crinoline dress, very tight in the bodice, with long, sweeping skirt. She was so small, so helpless and so beautiful that Ned's red blood warmed considerably just looking at her. He went in and asked permission to look through Pat Hurdee's papers.

He spent half an hour without success. Then he found a sort of wall-safe—a hole in the adobe partition which had been lined with cedar. Therein was an oilskin packet. He took it out, calling for Cora as he felt its weight.

She came running. Upon Pat Hurdee's desk Ned poured the gold coins, the specie and the scrip. He exclaimed, "Your father was not killed for his money! The Ace of Clubs!"

Cora said, "But—but who did it? Could it be that they were unable to find the money? Is it—is it all there, do you think?"

"Over five thousand dollars!" said Ned. "The Lazy T is safe!"

Cora's hand went out and touched the nearest gold-piece. She said sadly, "Ed Poglise is gone. I have no foreman. It's impossible for me to go on without someone I can trust. . . ."

They were silent for a moment. Then Ned said, "I could sell my little old spread. If—if you'd give me the job."

"Could you—couldn't we be partners?" she asked eagerly. "We could fix it up—legally, and everything. . . ."

He had the nerve to stare her down, then. He said slowly, "I reckon we could, Cora. I reckon I know now why my pa sent me to look after the daughter of Mary Reed."

Kid Beatty came in just then. At sight of the money his eyes bugged out. He said, "Then it was true Pat made a hit in the blackjack game with Fanny and Rigger!"

Ned said sharply, "What's that?"

"Heard about it in town," said the Kid. "Fanny was drinkin' a little—you know Fanny, Miss Cora. She's straight, but sometimes she cuts the fool with likker. Pat an' Rigger got her in the middle. You see her name on that scrip? Rigger got enough to take up her half interest in the Jay Bird, I hear!"

"Father borrowed five thousand dollars!" said Cora. "Mr. Rice has his note. All signed. . . . He showed it to me."

The Kid looked speculatively at Ned. Cora stared at first one, then the other. Ned walked stiffly across the room and reached down his belt. The two guns hung low. He tied them fast and said, "Somethin' queer about this. I'll just go into town and see about it. Kid, you stay here in case someone comes for that money. I don't need to tell you how to greet any visitor we have."

"No!" said Cora. "They killed Ed. . . ."

"Yeah," said Ned Stuart. "That's right! We ain't got even for Ed, quite. Bagley dropped the actual killer. But—I got to see the Duke!"

Kid Beatty said, "He's a big, fat gamblin' crook!"

"I know," nodded Ned. "You watch over Cora. I'll check on things in town."

He scarcely glanced at the girl as he went out. He had no illusions about the danger of his errand. But something told him that Rigger Rice—or someone—was planning to move, fast and hard, against the Lazy T.

Also, he had an idea that Hurdee's note which Rigger held against the ranch might be forged. Or that it had been paid off from the proceeds of Pat Hurdee's last gambling venture, and should be voided; but that Rice had, by some means, preserved it. Either way, this seemed a good time to visit Rigger Rice.

When he got into town he dismounted before the Jay Bird and very deliberately tied up Cora Hurdee's good horse. He settled his guns with a careful pat and went on into the saloon, and his eyes wary under the brim of his Stetson.

THERE were quite a few people around the tables and more at the bar, but he saw no one familiar. Then Fanny Dare came shouldering through and whispered, "Duke's in the back room, in a helluva poker game! Go and cover him!"

Ned said, "Now wait. I got some things to talk over with Duke—and with you, too!"

"You don't even know me," said Fanny. "Not that you ain't a right handsome boy, and all that!"

Ned said, "I've found some scrip signed by you. And some money. It was hidden out at the Lazy T."

Fanny's blue eyes glowed, then narrowed. She said, "Then you mean Pat wasn't robbed? And the Duke is absolutely right?"

"He wasn't robbed," said Ned. "But he was—"

"You're wearin' two guns," snapped Fanny. "Get back in there and protect that fat old fool! He's got more damn nerve! He's just plumb crazy, with Jim Gunner around. . . ."

She was insistently shoving Ned towards the hall.

He went, a trifle bewildered, but hoping now that Duke was on the level and close to some sort of showdown. Ned was impatient about showdowns. He couldn't wait for events to shape their own course. . . ."

The Duke seemed quite drunk. There were two empty bottles of bourbon whiskey beside him. His face was flushed and there was a moderately high stack of chips before him. Ned sidled in and leaned against the door, watching this newly dealt hand develop.

Bojo Hale was playing. Rigger Rice, fat and somber, sat next. Then there was Slide Kelley, then Jim Gunner seated next to the Duke himself.

Duke held the cards in his slim white hands. There was a great heap of chips in the center, before the draw. The Duke said, "How many, my brave li'l gamblers? How many ducats to the players? Speak up, my fine gang of cut-throats, before I deal 'em out!"

Jim Gunner muttered, "Keerful of your language, Bagley!"

"Yaas!" said Duke. "Yaas, indeed, my

merry lawman! How many cards, Bojo the Mojo?"

Hale scowled, his crossed-eyes vicious. He took one card. Rigger took two. Slide Kelley took one and Gunner two. The Duke held the deck out at arm's length. He said, "You can all see! I'm not dealing from the bottom! I'm dealing with one hand, with my cuffs rolled back. And gents, I am showing you the card I draw to my four-card flush. Pow!"

He made a sliding grab with his thumb. The card slipped off the deck, turned over and sailed gently, face upward, to the table-top. It was—the Ace of Clubs!

Two men grunted from the sheer surprise. For a moment there was complete silence. Bojo and Slide seemed about to draw, but they held quite still. Rigger Rice said, "Don't make a hippodrome of this game, Bagley! Play cards!"

The Duke held the other four cards in his left hand. He placed one finger on the Ace of Clubs and said, "Your bet, Rigger. We decided this was among gamblers, that none of us were working for you tonight. You wanted this game for a real night's sport, you said. You opened this roodle! You bet it!"

The Duke did not seem so drunk, now. Rigger made a small bet. The others called, except Jim Gunner. The marshal was biting his mustaches. He stared sideways at Duke. Then he said, "I bet five hundred you're fakin', stranger!"

Duke said, "I raise that five hundred!"

Rigger Rice leaned back. His chair creaked and his face was quite unpleasant. He said, "This ain't fun, now!"

"Call it off!" said Duke. "I dare you to call off the pot! You saw me draw! Was it on the up and up?"

Jim Gunner said harshly, "Play cards, Rigger!"

Rice said, "I drop."

Like obedient little men, the other two dropped. Duke was sneering at the obvious sign-off signal of Rice, after the conditions of the game had been set up by the fat Mayor himself. Of course, Hale and Kelley had been playing for Rigger right along.

Jim Gunner threw in chips. "I call!"

Duke flipped over his other four cards. They were the deuce, trey, four and five of clubs. . . .

Gunner got up heavily. He said, "That cleans me."

Duke raked in the chips. He totalled his winnings with slim fingers, calculating with lightning speed how much he had before him. He said, almost absently, "I'd like to cut you one time for a half interest in this place—against these chips!"

Rice said, "I ain't crazy yet, Bagley. I'm lettin' you walk around this town alive—which ain't bright! But my mind hasn't gone altogether."

"No," said Duke reflectively. "I suppose not."

He cashed his chips at the bank, which was held by Hale. He placed the money in his pockets, then seemed to notice Ned for the first time. He nodded, "Hello, Stuart. Did you find Pat Hurdee's cash and stuff?"

Ned swallowed, but tried to be casual. "Yeah. Thought Rigger Rice and the marshal ought to know."

Duke said, "Yaas. Yaas, indeed. Like to arrest Rigger for the murder of Pat Hurdee, Marshal?"

Jim Gunner, standing, blinking, said, "He never did it!"

"No?" grinned the Duke. "Look at him!"

But before anyone could look at Rigger Rice, the big mayor had thrown a cuspidor at the lamp. It went over and out. Lead filled the air where the Duke had been. Ned couldn't get his guns into action for fear of hitting the Duke. Bojo Hale and Slide Kelley seemed not bound by any such scruples, and Gunner was cursing in the darkness.

Ned had to step in or out. He chose out. He was waiting there, tense, both guns on the doorway when Fanny came, leading a crowd of curious citizens. At that moment Duke crawled on his hands and knees over the lintel.

He looked up and inquired, "Got a horse?"

"At the rack—Lazy T brand," snapped Ned. "But we can get those four. . . ."

"Town wouldn't like it," said Duke. "Out!"

They backed out the front way, Fanny between them. There were scowls, but the drawn guns stopped any challenges. In the back room the noise had stopped, but Rigger did not come out, nor did the

marshal. As they came to the end of the bar, Duke produced a card and dropped it upon the polished mahogany. He said, "A quart of whiskey, please. Blue Grass bourbon!"

The gaping bartender slid the bottle along. Duke accepted it and bowed. The barkeep stammered, "You—you gotta pay for that!"

"Just give Rigger my card, when he comes out!" said Duke.

The three went out the door. The bartender stared at the crumpled, ancient Ace of Clubs.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Duke Cleans Up

THE Duke high-tailed it west on the Lazy T horse. Ned and Fanny went down to Fanny's house and saddled Petey and the roan mare. Ned said, "I don't get it. Duke said there wasn't time—that he couldn't explain. You reckon Cora's in danger? I was a fool to let him go. . . ."

Fanny said, "That fat old somebody does what he wants to, and you can't get much ahead of him. Let's just hurry after him. No use arguin' about it. One thing: That Duke knows who killed Pat Hurdee, and why. He won't tell now, but he knows!"

* * *

The Lazy T animal had good legs. The Duke was almost certain of himself and was in a huge hurry. It was the killing of Ed Poglise which had started him thinking along certain lines. It had seemed sort of unnecessary to have Faro Joe murder Poglise . . . for it had been murder to use the hideout weapon. Yet, that killing was part of the pattern.

"Git along, you muley-horse," muttered the Duke. "I'm gettin' to feel like a range detective or somethin'. This ain't no kinda doin's for the old Duke. Just wanta see Mary Reed's gal and Hoke Stuart's boy get along. This town and its law and order gets wearisome. But Rigger's a plenty smart coot, keepin' everything legal like he does. . . ."

The lights of the Lazy T ranch house came in sight. Duke rolled off the horse, leaving him to graze the home range. Afoot he swore and began walking, not making any noise. He came up to the house without incident, which did not surprise him, but he was very cautious about peering in the window.

There was no sign of Cora Hurdee. Duke went all around the house. She was not anywhere that he could discover. He melted back into the shadow of the corral, near where Pat Hurdee had died, and considered.

There was a small bunkhouse, but the crew was out on the range. There was the barn which he had noted before. There was no sign of Kid Beatty.

Duke walked lightly to the barn. Horses moved, but only with the stirrings of peaceful night-time. It was past midnight. Duke started for the bunkhouse, but the sound of approaching riders stopped him. He swerved and tried for the back door of the house.

It was open. Duke flung it wide and a thin stream of light from one lamp came out. A pistol shot sounded, but Duke was already running around the corral.

Into the yard rode two men. They flung themselves down from their horses and strode for the front door of the ranch house. After a moment one cursed and shouldered his way inside.

Duke could see them through the window. It was Bojo Hale and Slide Kelley. They went immediately into Hurdee's office and began rummaging through his desk.

But Duke went on around, staying in a circle which kept him away from the house. He saw the big man sitting his horse, safe outside the gate. Duke went along the fence, ducking his head so as not to make a target against the starlit sky. He crept closer. On the horse, Rigger Rice did not move.

Duke came to the turn. He would have to run across the remaining ten feet or so, or else shoot and take his chances against the two guns of Hale and Kelley. Just then Kelley shouted, "There's nothin' in here, and the gal ain't in the house. What do we do?"

"Search the whole place!" said Rigger. "Bagley must have run for it with the money he won. . . . An' I want that money!"

Duke set himself. He was not built

for swift, urgent physical effort, but he flung himself forward, leaping into the air. His gun muzzle slashed at Rigger's head, his other hand jerked the big man from the saddle.

Rice did not have time to cry out. Again the Duke clubbed him, driving him to the ground. In a jiffy, Duke had him tied with his own rope and rolled against the fence. Then he found Rigger's hat. It did not fit him very well, but it would do with a little splitting of the seam. Duke crammed it on his head and clambered aboard Rigger's horse.

He resumed the vigil Rice had been keeping. He heard the rider far down the road, but he did not move. He had to keep Hale and Kelley busy, had to make them believe he was Rigger until the situation jelled.

Kelley came towards him and said, "The gal's tied up in the bunkhouse! What the hell's been goin' on here?"

"Get the money!" said Duke, imitating Rigger's voice as best he could.

Kid Beatty came riding, hell for leather. He threw up his hand and called, "It's me, Rigger! You played hell, not gettin' out here earlier! I told you not to kill Ed! That Stuart feller found the money. I was scared he'd get you, so I started away. But the gal gave me orders to stay. When I argued, she caught on that things wasn't right, an' I had to hog-tie her. We got to get outa here, pronto? Take the money and run! Stuart and that Bagley and Fanny are onto things!"

Duke said, still trying to imitate Rice's voice, "Give me the money, Kid."

The Kid came closer, staring. He said, "Hey! You ain't Rigger! Hey!"

Duke's gun-muzzle was taking a bad beating that night, and he clocked it into the Kid's skull. He heard Kelley say, "Bojo, there's somethin' wrong. . . ."

Then Duke knew the game was up. He doffed the uncomfortable, tight hat. He rode his horse through the gate.

"Put 'em up, my fine-feathered crooks!" he shouted. "Step against that wall, face forward!"

But they had split and Bojo was saying, "He got Rigger! Kill him, Slide!"

Duke fanned a shot to the left, then turned and aimed at Kelley. He was sliding off the horse and he missed Kelley. But Bojo Hale was staggering around the yard, his gun banging uselessly as his finger clutched the trigger in pain. Kelley fired twice. One shot burned past Duke's ear.

The Duke's off-hand shots were always his best, he thought. From the hip, without aim, he threw lead. The first bullet caught Kelley a little high. It tumbled him over on his back. Duke went over and looked. The .45 slug had gone right between Kelley's eyes!

Fanny and Ned were hitting the road now. The time schedule was a little off, the Duke thought, frowning. There was another act to be played out. He did not wait for the two, but ran for the bunkhouse. Without lighting a lamp, he pawed over the bunks until he found the girl. He cut her bonds with his huge clasp knife.

Cora said, "The Kid! He—he was in some deal to work against father!"

"Yaas, indeed!" said Duke. "Rigger bought him. And Ed Poglise, who must have hated your father. But Ed wanted you taken care of, so they killed him. Savvy?"

"It's all mixed up," moaned the girl. "Where—where is Ned Stuart?"

"Just comin' in the gate," said Duke. "You go out and meet him."

She did not think it strange, but rushed forward. "Ned!" she called. "Are you all right? Are you safe?"

He heard Ned answer her. He heard Fanny say, "Where's that fat crook, that Bagley?"

Then he saw the other man, who had ridden in quietly and was sitting his horse in the back yard.

★

DUKE stepped out and watched him dismount. When the sturdy figure was afoot, Duke said, "Hello, Jim Gunner. Returnin' to the scene of the crime? It was right here you outdrew Pat Hurdee, wasn't it?"

Gunner made a familiar, sideways leap. His body twitched. His gun came out and his left hand streaked to fan it.

The Duke's draw was orthodox. He stood straight and dipped his hand. It came up, the wrist swiveled, the thumb cocked the hair trigger.

Gunner fired first. He also fired second. But the marshal was between Duke and the faint light of the house. One bullet tore through Duke's shirt.

The Duke shot for the shoulder. Gunner was moving. Duke's bullet hit him over the heart. He fell down.

Duke went to him and gently disengaged the gun. He said, "I didn't want to kill you, Gunner. You were in the middle on this deal. Rigger shot Pat in the back while you were patting him with lead in the front—but I don't think you knew it. Was Rigger in the Ace of Clubs?"

The others were running, shouting excitedly. Duke had to lean close to hear the words of the dying man. "Rigger—run out of town by the Ace. . . . Years ago. I was in—this was after Hurdee and Hoke Stuart got out. Made Rigger give me job. Had it on him—but he—"

"You and Pat had a run-in?"

"They rooked Fanny." gasped Gunner. "I warned 'em. Pat was in it. . . . I came out here to get Rigger tonight. And you—because Fanny kept you all night. . . ."

Duke said rapidly, "Nothin' to that, Gunner. Just a friendly deal. Fanny's all right—straight as string. . . ."

She came steadily, then, at Duke's gesture. She knelt down and lifted Gunner's head. She said softly, "You were always the best man, Jim. I was—mighty fond of you, always."

Gunner said, "Thanks, Fanny. Makes me feel better. . . ."

Duke and Ned and Cora sat in the house. Duke said, "Rigger's tied up out yonder. He wanted control of Saddle, without Pat Hurdee, who had something on him from the past. Yaas, indeed! These shady pasts!" He sighed virtuously.

"Wish I had that bottle of whiskey. It's in a saddle-bag on one of your horses, Miss Cora. . . . Rigger wanted Fanny out of it, too. He got them all snarled up in that blackjack game. But he was short of cash and wanted to get back what Hurdee had won from Fanny and also from Rigger, in the end. He faked that note. But when Ned and I came in town, he thought the law was on his trail and that he had to get out, pronto. So he began overplayin' it all along the line."

"But Ed Poglise and the Kid!" said Cora. "They were *our* men. How could—?"

The Duke said gently, "Ed Poglise allus loved your maw. I reckon he was just stickin' to see you got taken care of. And he didn't think Pat was doing right by you. The Kid was a bad one. They killed Poglise when he welshed on them. They meant to have the Lazy T, then."

"But I'm not an officer!" said Ned Stuart.

"Maybe you think I am!" said Duke. "That was just guilty conscience. Terrible thing, a conscience! I never had one. . . . You'll find the money on the Kid's body. You can do what you want with Rigger, but I'd string him up!"

"Where are you going?" demanded Cora.

"Just takin' a leetle ride," said the Duke. "You'll be hearin' from me. Glad to do a favor for Hoke Stuart's son, any day! So long, folks!"

Petey was waiting, whinnying a little. Fanny, disturbed and saddened by the death of faithful Jim Gunner, was coming into the house. Duke took a vengeful kick at the trussed-up Rigger and said, "I slicked that ace of clubs right under your nose, you four-flusher! You got to get people drunk to swindle them! And while I slicked it, I worked out the trey and deuce that I needed with my left hand! And you call yourself a gambler!"

He climbed upon Petey. He was very weary and he had to ride hard. Be just like that Fanny to follow him. He had seen it in her eye, lately.

Not that she wasn't a fine figger of a woman! "Yaas, indeed!" said the Duke to Petey as they hit the trail. "Too danged fine! Trouble with a woman like that, first thing you know, you're workin' in double harness! Yaas, indeed!"

Twenty miles farther on he spoke again, dolorously, "Now Fanny'll own the Jay Bird. Nice a layout as I ever saw. And I could of bilked her out of it, slick as a breeze, give me time!"

He almost reined in to turn back at the thought of the profitable saloon and all the nice tables of chance. But he didn't. He rode west, away from the rising sun, away from the persistent vision of a tall, blonde honkytonk queen who seemed to be calling him to come back. . . .

THE END

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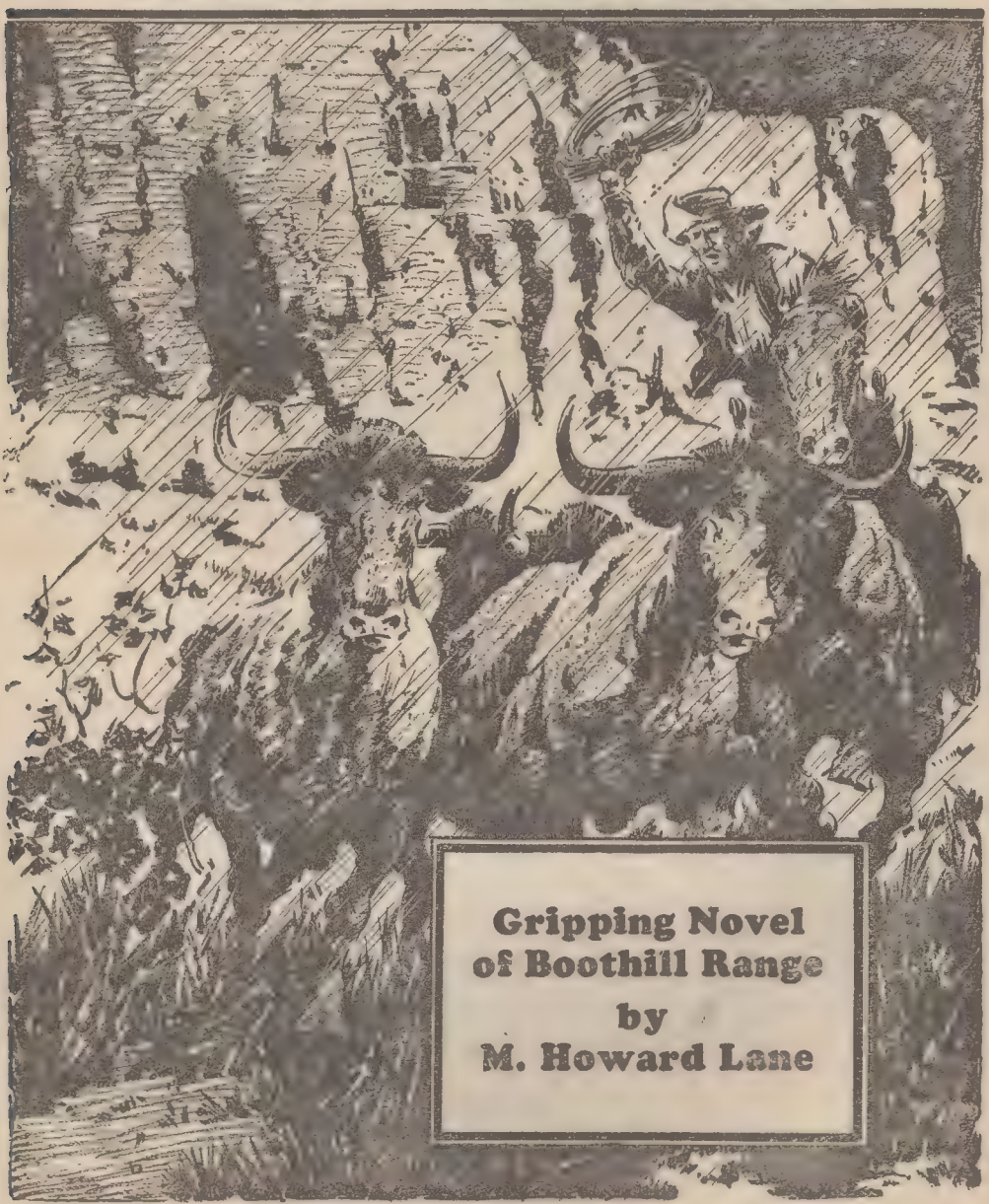

The only way that Mark McBride might at last face the Wolfkill Bushwhack Syndicate, was to hear, from a tight-nailed pine board coffin, his own funeral service. . . . That he might rise from the dead and read them his own gunsmoke Bill of Rights!

Already the leaders of the herd were streaming past their couvert. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Sell Out—or Die!

THE pine-board coffin was decorously covered with a black cloth that swept to the floorboards of the buckboard in which it was riding. Old Lobo Bill Yancy drove the vehicle, and he was particular about dodging the ruts in the road that led upward to the tree-crested crown of Cottonwood Hill.

Mark McBride was glad of that, for the padding in the bottom of the coffin was not thick enough to cushion the jolts. The pillow beneath his head was uncomfortable, too, and the holes he and Yancy had carefully drilled in the bottom of the box didn't let in enough air.

But the possible outcome of this ride was worth the cost. A little grimly, Mark figured that it might start him on the greatest venture of his life—and adventure equal to crossing the dark corridor into true death. Death to which bushwhack lead was supposed to have consigned him.

Through the sides of the coffin, muted sounds came to Mark, and there was one that tore at him. It was the unashamed, husky sobbing of a girl, and it made Mark bitterly conscious of the time he'd wasted away from this high Wyoming valley of the Wolfkill.

There had been the years of schooling on which his father had insisted. "I had none myself, son," Mark remembered old Red McBride remarking soberly. "You're going to get what I missed. The Double M can pay the bill."

Yes, the Double M had been rich enough to send him to mining school in California and set him up in his own engineering office afterward. And yet all those years he had spent in school, and in building the start of a professional

reputation had been hated years. The Wolfkill, with its vast, rolling leagues of grass, and dark pine ridges sloping upward into mountains that flanked the valley was what he had wanted. He had wanted the feel of saddle under him, not the cushion of a swivel chair!

But for the sake of his father, and the strong bond of affection that had held them together during the years, he had accepted the edict of his parent. In his hale and hearty fifties, bull-voiced Red McBride had been good for many more years of healthful life. Years to enjoy the fruits of the fight he had made to build the Double M, when this Wolfkill Valley had been nothing but a cattleman's dream at the end of the long trail from Texas. Red McBride had brought a herd up here, and so had a few other pioneers. They had prospered and lived together in peace. There was enough grass in the Wolfkill for all of them.

A little town had grown at the mouth of the valley, and more people had come here to the Wolfkill. Ranches had changed hands, and old-timers had gone to their last rest. A spur line of the Northwestern Railroad was building this way now, to tap the rich valley.

Perhaps its coming had a lot to do with the scourge of sudden death that had dropped like a bird with ugly wings over the Wolfkill. Two ranchers were dead already—and the valley air seemed filled with the wicked, tense feel of more death to come.

The first rancher to die had been Ray Dunning, an old-timer with vast grass and rich bottomland holdings. And the second owner to feel the scorch of bushwhack lead between his shoulders had been Red McBride!

★

A TELEGRAM winging across States had summoned Mark, and by train, and stage, and horse, he had gotten here, but his coming had been too slow. Red McBride was dead by the time he arrived.

Thin lips tight behind his drooping white mustache, old Lobo Bill Yancy had talked with the returned prodigal after McBride's funeral.

"Your dad's last word to me was that we run down the skunks who poured bushwhack lead into him. He warn't thinkin' of himself, I don't believe," the old Texan who had come up the trail with McBride added doubtfully. "Red always figgered life had to end sometime, and he made a point of gettin' the most out of it as he went along. The promise he made me give him was for the rest of the Wolfkill. Red took a mighty lot of pride in watching this valley develop, and he had a finger in the pie that got Northwestern to start a spur line this way.

"We got plenty of decent people living in the Wolfkill, and he was thinking of them, and of their future if this Bushwhack Syndicate keeps its pace. Ain't no question but what there's men in this valley with an eye to ruling it. Kill off your owners, and it sets the heirs a mighty good example. Sell out or die when the time comes, and yuh can imagine what price they'll get. . . ."

Mark had answered that with the tracings of an ironic smile on his lips. "You figger these bushwhackers think I'll sell out to some dummy agent of theirs?"

Lobo Bill Yancy had chuckled. "Not if I know my redheaded McBrides, yuh won't! Which brings up another p'int. Your mother is dead, and your dad is now buried on Cottonwood Hill alongside her. If the Bushwhack Syndicate manages to drive their lead into you, mister, there won't be a fightin' heir to take over the reins of the Double M. And they'll try and get you. Make no mistake about that.

"The man who owns the Double M bosses this end of the Wolfkill. They'll make a try for you, son, and I hope Californy schoolbooks and a swivel chair ain't made you forget the Colt savvy I taught you as a button."

A tall, hard-bronzed man close to his thirties, Mark had answered Lobo with action, not words. The neat gray of his broadcloth coat seemed to sweep back of its own accord, and the cartridge-studded belt about his lean hips had given up its burden of Colt steel.

Lobo Bill Yancy had blinked. "Better'n ever!" he said.

"I've never quit practicing," Mark answered him briefly, and the pain of his father's death had twisted his thin, sharp

face. "Someday I knew the Wolfkill would call me back," he said. "If I'd never left, dad might still be alive."

"Don't start worrying on that score," Lobo Bill had warned grimly. "He's daid, and we can't resurrect him. Start thinking about yourself. There's bushwhack slugs marked for your back!"

That was the reason he was riding in a decorously draped coffin now, Mark reflected, and the little ironic grin touched his lips again. He was in his coffin because he had started thinking about himself, about Red McBride—and the Wolfkill.

As a boy, he had found a small cave on Cottonwood Hill, and with scrap lumber and leather he had fashioned hinges and door to close it. It had been a secret place of his own, and he had planted shrubs about the entrance to mask the door. Suddenly the memory of that cave, and its closeness to the surface of the ground had come back to Mark.

"If I was to die of bushwhack bullets," he'd spoken his thought, "the wolves might try and take over the Double M, there bein' no other heirs. Possession is nine points of the law, and herds moved onto grass are pretty hard to push off. Mebbe if I was dead, your Bushwhack Syndicate might move right in."

"But you ain't dead," Lobo Bill had said logically.

"I'm goin' to be, right soon," Mark had drawled, "but there ain't anybody goin' to see the body but you. That will all be written out, and a dead man's wishes are respected."

It had taken them a week of hard-working nights to put a false bottom in the grave above that boyhood cave. The bottom of the coffin, too, was only hooked onto the side-walls, and by lifting himself, Mark knew he could unhook it, and reach the trigger they had constructed to drop the floor out of the grave, and deposit him with a solid jar in the cave beneath.

"With the Ghost of Mark McBride on the loose," he had told Lobo Bill, "we may see some action!"

SO now they were on their way to Cottonwood Hill, and Mark's only regret was that he had not been able to tell Anne Comstock the truth. Her sobbing was a heartbreaking, intermittent murmur pouring through the walls of the coffin. It told Mark more of her feelings for him than words ever had, and once again he regretted the years he had been away from the Wolfkill, without even writing to her.

By the lurch of the wagon under him, Mark knew they were about at their destination. Sweat seeped inside the collar of his shirt, and he drew a deep breath, even though the air inside the coffin was stifling.

Three nights before, Lobo Bill Yancy had ridden into Wolfkill and spread the grim word that a second McBride was dead.

How many men the announcement had startled was something for the future to tell. Men who might even now be in the small procession following the buckboard, Mark realized grimly.

The lid of the coffin was tightly screwed in accordance with the written instructions he'd left, and Lobo Bill Yancy had made it vociferously plain to everybody that he'd dug Mark's remote grave single-handed.

The buckboard stopped, and Mark heard the muted voices of men. Old Ode Comstock, Anne's father, was one of the pall-bearers. Owner of the Circle C, he was neighbor and old Texican friend of Red McBride.

"Lift him easy, boys," Mark heard Comstock warn the other pall-bearers. "He died the hard way. Let's make his rest a soft one."

From the sounds he could hear, Mark decided that most of the valley and some of the townspeople had ridden in the funeral procession from the Double M. The Bushwhack Syndicate was here, too, looking as sober as all the rest. A man could bet on that, Mark McBride decided grimly.

He wondered, even more grimly, what questions those men had asked each other after Yancy had announced his death. And regardless of the questions there was only one answer at which they could arrive.

Some new ruthless force had entered the valley. Only, they wouldn't be calling it by its right name. No, they couldn't be calling it the ghost of Mark McBride!

CHAPTER TWO

Ghosts Don't Ride Black Horses!

FIVE minutes later, the voice of Wolfkill's community minister was speaking of him as his coffin balanced at grave-side. Mark could hear the words, and they made his ears feel hot.

"Cut off in the young prime of life," Reverend Trevey was saying. "Yes, friends, here was a man destined to live that he might better serve his fellow man, and cowardly lead in the night cut short his existence. I tell you now, friends, that the man who killed Mark McBride will pay for his crime—either here or in Hell! It is a tragic loss to all of us to lose Mark McBride, because the Wolfkill needed him, as it needed his father, now dead at the hands of the same assassins."

It was a curious feeling to listen to your own obituary. Mark felt the sweat standing deep on his forehead. Involuntarily he stiffened as he felt the coffin being lowered into the grave, and heard the fading murmur of Reverend Trevey's voice.

"Dust thou art, to dust returneth. And may God have mercy on your soul. . . ."

The clods, starting to shower down, sounded like the beat of heavy hands on a drum-head. Mark knew that his nerves were steady as most, but he could feel every muscle of his body tensing. Becoming a ghost was not a pleasant sensation!

It was over finally, and there was nothing but blackness and silence about him. Lungs pumping in the stagnant air, he managed to unhook the false bottom of the coffin, and by raising himself a little, he was able to touch the wooden trigger they had carefully arranged. The bottom dropped out of the grave, and in a shower of dirt and clods, Mark felt himself dropping into the light-streaked dusk of the cave beneath the grave.

Here was fresh air, and it was more delicious than any drink. So was the cigarette he rolled for himself. After that there was nothing to do but wait for darkness that would bring Lobo Bill Yancy back from the Double M.

Mark found his impatience hard to control, but he curbed himself with the grim knowledge that the ghost trail he was set to travel might likely prove long and dangerous.

The proof of that came with darkness and Bill Yancy. From the doorway of the small, secret cave here on Cottonwood Hill, Mark watched the Double M foreman materialize out of the gloom.

Only the old Texan's white mustache and white hair splashed lightness against the dark. Otherwise his clothes and the mount he rode were black as night. On lead behind him was Mark's black Diablo horse. Getting the animals away from the ranch had been simple enough, for Lobo Bill had dismissed their crew, even the Chinese cook. It had all been a part of their plan, but the thing he had to say as he swung from leather, was not cut to pattern.

"Mac," he handed over a package of cold meat sandwiches he had made, "eat hearty, and eat quick. We've got to do some riding and checking, and luck's got to sit the saddle with us."

Lobo Bill Yancy was not a man to exaggerate the seriousness of a situation. Mark studied the rawhide Texan. "What has happened?" he asked quietly.

Yancy spat disgustedly into the brush that masked the entrance to the cave. "That fool Parson Trevey is yellin' that it's time for folks to drop their plows and pitchforks, and pick up their guns. He's claimin' it's the duty of every man to join a Protective Committee and start patroling this valley until the bushwhackers who killed Ray Dunning, your dad—and you—are found. That danged Trevey has called a meeting for tonight of Wolfkill citizens. They're getting together at his church, and if he manages to get folks stirred up enough, they'll start doin' their own night-riding!"

Mark drew a deep breath. This was a contingency on which he hadn't counted. "If they start doing that," he said between his teeth, "there'll be hell to pay! One of two things will happen damned quick. Either the Bushwhack Syndicate will be able to pick off the men they want to kill as they ride their patrols, or else the Syndicate will play it straight and easy until Wolfkill simmers down."

"If the Syndicate crawls in a hole until folks cool their collars," Lobo Bill Yancy

spat disgustedly, "it means you're going to have to keep bein' a ghost for a long time to come—after baitin' a trap with the finest spread in the Valley. One hope we got, and that's all. Sam Kramer, Jepp Howe, and Cave Summers swing a lot of weight around here, and they're ag'in this general night-riding by a pack of half-baked vigilantes."

Kramer, Mark recalled, was a prosperous saloonman in Wolfkill. Jepp Howe was a cattleman, owning a big ranch bordering on the Double M. Cave Summers was the sheriff. He hadn't had much luck trying to find the killers of Dunning and his father, but even so, this should carry weight with the group that was meeting tonight.

"We got to work fast," Bill Yancy growled. "That means riding tonight. There's men in this valley I wouldn't trust with my grandmother's gold tooth, and I got me an idee they'll be having a meeting of their own." He chuckled without mirth.

"Wrangling about how yuh managed to git bushwhacked, and what they'd better do now. Mebbe if we're lucky, we can pin the deadwood on them afore that fool parson gets folks steamed too high an' they start a ruckus."

Mark shook his auburn head. "Using the Double M for bait, I'd figgered to wait until some outfit started to move cattle onto our grass. Now—"

He halted his speech suddenly, for through the stillness of night, distant sound came floating up to Cottonwood Hill.

There came the muted rumble of many hoofs. The grumbling mutter of cattle on the march!

Yancy had his white head cocked to one side. "Stock movin'!" The words came out on a sighed breath. "And they ain't ours. . . ."

THE Bushwhack Syndicate was working fast. Somebody had already started moving a sizeable herd onto Double M grass. The riders pushing those cattle ahead of them were taking advantage of the cloud scud that held the moon behind it.

Mark felt a tingle of excitement. "Weren't you the one, Lobo," he murmured, "wantin' action in a hurry—?"

"Looks like she's down there, all right," the Texan grunted. "Mac, let's you and me take a ride. Mebbe we won't have to go far!"

Mark McBride was already moving to his black Diablo horse. He stepped to saddle, lifted a heavy cartridge belt and Colt from bags at the cantle. Buckling the weapon about his waist, he nodded to the leathery Texan. "Lead out, amigo," he murmured softly. "You know these night trails better than me."

"That's what schoolbook larnin' and swivel chairs do to a man!" Yancy growled. "Makes yuh forget the home trails."

He had forgotten more than the home trails, Mark thought bleakly as he followed the Texan out into the rain that was whipping around the slope of the hill. He had forgotten the characters of the men living here in the Wolfkill and that doubled the difficulty of finding Syndicate suspects.

Yancy seemed to have the names of some in his books, but looking at it honestly, Mark knew there wasn't a man he could definitely judge guilty. That was why they had been forced to bait a trap with his supposed death. The bushwhackers who wanted control of the Double M had to make the first move.

And it looked as if they were doing it. Down to the valley floor now, riding through the luminous dark, Mark followed Lobo toward the sound.

Another great novel of a man who had to be written off the roster as dead before he could hope to save his range, "Gallows Graduate" by Joe Austell Small, heads the all-star lineup of April 10 STORY WESTERN. Be sure to get a copy and read the startling drama of the curly-wolf range-saviour, born at the end of a cottonwood noose! On sale March 10th!

Swales and washes chopped the terrain about them, but with eyes that seemed to see clearly in the dark, Yancy threaded a way forward. Trailing him as he veered suddenly to take cover in brush that fringed a valley dip, Mark saw, through the thinning rain, the black moving mass of cattle off to their left. He caught the dark silhouette of riders pushing the stock along, and heard their high thin cries above the sound of hoofs.

"Tryin' to cover territory," Yancy grunted. "They'll bust their noses into Cottonwood Hill and scatter, which is what whoever is behind 'em wants. I'd give me a nickel to get a good look at one of them riders—"

"A brand," Mark murmured, "will tell as much."

"And how you goin' to read a brand in the dark?" Yancy demanded.

Mark's fingers had been busy untying his rope. "This way," he said flatly, and shook out a loop.

Already the leaders of the advancing herd were streaming past their covert. A young two-year old came streaking toward the brush. Somewhere a rider yipped shrilly. Mark hardly heard the man. His rope was swinging above his head, then streaking forward to neatly snag the feet of the running steer.

"You're a double-damned fool to risk this!" Yancy growled, but he was leaving his saddle as he spoke.

Rope dallied, Mark hit the ground almost as quickly as his companion. Speed was what this demanded. If those riders driving the herd across Double M grass saw them, lead would come seeking their bodies.

Match in hand, Mark thumbed it alight, cupping the blaze between his palms. The brief glow lighted a brand that showed darkly against the brindle hide of the young steer. For a moment that seemed to stretch into years of time, Mark stared at that brand, and he couldn't believe the truth before his eyes. For the brand was a clean C in a circle.

"Circle C!" he heard Lobo breathe the words. "Comstock! Ode Comstock. I'll be damned!"

Anne's father! That was the thought numbing Mark. The scorch of the match against his fingers was like the prick of a sharp knife, and it jarred his senses back to the present. The main bulk of the herd was streaming past them now, and riders were right behind the cattle.

"Let's git on the move," Yancy was urging. "Settin' here ain't goin' to tell us why Comstock is pushing Circle C beef onto Double M grass."

A little numbly, Mark came to his feet as Lobo Bill released the two-year-old. The animal lurched to his feet—and the moon chose the same moment to appear brightly through a break in the cloud scud overhead. It was like a giant searchlight brightening the gloom of the night.

Mark heard a nearing yell as he reached his feet, and he knew that they had been spotted.

"Run for it," Yancy yelled desperately. He sprinted for his own black mount, and Mark leaped toward Diablo. Discovery of his identity now would ruin the plan they had so carefully laid, might result in true death. Death more than likely, he realized grimly, as Colt-flame lighted the night behind them. He heard the snarl of lead past his shoulder, and then he was swinging into Diablo's saddle as more bullets started to sing about them.

There was no time to coil a rope. He cast the riata from his saddle, and wheeled. The moonlight showed him four riders on the charge. Talking guns were in their hands.

Yancy had his own Colt in his hand as his rearing mount whirled.

"Don't use it!" Mark yelled. "Ride! Hit the brush, mister—"

Behind him, he heard a voice cry thinly above the rumble of running animals, and crackling weapons. "One of 'em looks like Mark McBride!"

And another voice made instant, contemptuous answer. "He's daid, yuh fool! Ghosts don't ride black horses. Cut 'em down!"

CHAPTER THREE

Grave-side Visitors

A BULLET stung Diablo's rump, and sent the big black leaping forward after Yancy's running mount. The Texan was veering toward a trail that would lead them into the brush-topped swale on their left. The moon hid

itself behind the clouds as they dipped into the wash, and darkness came again like a thick blanket to cover them.

But the light had lasted long enough to show the men with the Circle C herd the path they had taken. Above the sound of his own mount's hoofs, Mark could hear the clatter of following riders.

"Danged anxious to take our taws!" Lobo Bill Yancy growled. "If anybody had told me yistiddy that Ode's cowpokes would be slinging lead at me today, I'd have called 'em a liar. And if anybody had tole me that Circle C beef would be eatin' Double M grass tonight, I wouldn't even have bothered to call 'em a liar! Why, Ode Comstock was your dad's best friend. Him and Red come into this country together, swapped boots, and slept in the same soogans. I just cain't believe that he'd be the fust to try and cut himself a slice of Double M grass!"

Mark could preface the thoughts Yancy was speaking before they came, for the same things were in his own mind. It didn't seem possible that Ode could be the one responsible for the bushwhack lead that had crashed through Red McBride's shoulders. And yet, Circle C bullets had just been humming about his own shoulders, and Circle C riders were even now pushing them hard.

Words that he had spoken earlier that night, came back like an eerie echo to haunt him. "Using Double M for bait, I'd figgered to wait until some hombres started to move cattle onto our grass. First outfit that does gets a call. . . ."

And it had to be the Circle C! Mark thought of Anne Comstock. Kids together, they had grown up like brother and sister. It was not until wide distance had been placed between them that Mark had found out that he couldn't forget the daughter of the Circle C.

She had seemed a little shy, a little cool, perhaps, when he had made his first call after his father's death. But her unashamed grief that afternoon as the procession wended its slow way to his own funeral had made Mark realize the depths of her feelings.

He was thinking of her now, as they moved along the wash, and the words he brought to his lips came harder than any he had ever uttered. "I said we'd make a call on the first hombre who pushed his brand onto Double M grass. We will—with ready guns!"

"Yuh won't tonight," Lobo Bill Yancy growled. Them pesky hombres behind are pushin' us in the opposite direction from the Circle C. I'm turnin' off up ahead, hittin' the open, and hopin' they'll foller me. Git yourself back to your grave, Mister Ghost, and don't stir from it until I come up tomorrow night. Might be I'll have news by then."

There was sense in the Texan's suggestion, Mark knew, but he hated to admit it. Never a man to put off until tomorrow anything that he could do today, he wanted the showdown, pronto. If Ode Comstock was the guiding black genius behind the activities of the Bushwhack Syndicate, the time to know it was now. And yet common sense told him that Yancy's plan was better.

"Bueno!" he agreed grimly. "But don't be so late coming tomorrow, mister. My bed's going to feel mighty hard tonight, and there won't be much sleep in my head until I know the answer to Comstock's move."

The knowledge of the returned prodigal's feeling for a girl who might never be his now, was in the growled reply of the white-haired foreman of the Double M.

"If yuh think my bed's goin' to feel any better'n yours, you're loco! Git goin' now, while I lead them gents a chase. Keep on up this wash a piece, and then haul down for a spell. Them cusses on our trail will follow the sound of my bronc, and give yuh a chance to mosey on to Cottonwood Hill. Don't forget that you're a ghost, and got to stay that way for awhile.

"One of them blasted cowpokes on our tail figgered he recognized you, and if the word that the Ghost of Mark McBride is ridin' Wolfkill Valley, it'll drive the Bushwhack Syndicate into cover quicker'n Parson Trevey's vigilantes. They'll know somethin' stinks, and they'll also know it ain't your carcass!"

"It looks," Mark reminded the Texan, "like the Syndicate has aready moved." The words felt bitter as acid against his lips.

Twenty minutes later, he was putting Diablo into the rutted road that led to

the dome of Cottonwood Hill. Behind him out in the rolling reaches of Double M range, the chase after Lobo Bill Yancy was still going on.

Those riders, Mark reflected bitterly, had accomplished their purpose in pushing Circle C stock this far onto McBride grass. The wedge was a deep one, for they could claim all territory on which their stock grazed, when the rest of the wolves started to try and edge in for a final partitioning of the great ranch.

Head bowed in thought, Mark was hardly aware that he was nearing the private cemetary of the McBrides until a horse nickered a welcome from up ahead.

Trained from a colt to respond to no such call, Diablo remained quiet, but the sound jerked Mark upright in his saddle. Hand sliding to the weapon beneath his coat, Mark peered ahead through the luminous night.

The shadows of giant cottonwoods cast their pattern on the ground about him. The corridor along which he was riding ended at the grave where he had been buried that afternoon. On a promontory dropping to the brush-cloaked mouth of the cave beneath, he could see the mound of earth covering the coffin which had held him.

Staring ahead, Mark blinked. For a crouched figure was hunched down beside his grave!

★

THERE was no sign of the horse that had nickered, and as he slipped swiftly from the back of Diablo, and drop-reined the black in thick shadow, Mark saw the individual at the grave-side fail to stir.

The night had held its share of grim surprises, but none quite equaled this. On boots light as the touch of a leaf against the earth, Mark slipped forward. Trees surrounded the site of his grave on three sides. He was close enough to make a sudden rush forward when a twig snapped beneath his feet. In the stillness, the sound was large. He saw the crouched figure rise, as he launched himself ahead.

"Some folks," Mark gritted, "come alive mighty quick!"

The sound of his voice, more than the words he spoke, seemed to make the person beside his grave wilt. The figure his arms caught had no resistance in it. Mark felt the pressure of a woman's softness against him, and then a tear-wet face tipped upward toward his own.

"Anne!" He breathed, and his heart felt as if it was a solid lump in his throat. "Anne, you darling! Here!"

A shaky laugh answered him, and Mark felt the girl's weight settle more heavily against his chest. "Mac, Mac—" At first it seemed to be all she could say. "You—you're alive; It—it *must* be you!"

Mark drew a deep ragged breath. "The funeral was faked. Yancy and I got the idea that if we left the ranch unprotected, the cusses who bushwhacked dad might try and move in. They have!" he added.

"Who—?" The girl was still trying to recover from the shock of seeing the man she thought dead.

Fingers hard against her arms, Mark pushed the girl back from him. "The hombre's name is Comstock," he said bleakly. "Ode Comstock! Ever hear of him?"

"Dad," Anne's voice was barely above a whisper. "Dad? Oh, Mac, you couldn't believe that he meant to steal Double M range?"

"When I see Circle C stock pushin' their horns against the base of Cottonwood Hill, what am I supposed to think?"

The girl's words came on a worried sigh. "Only—you're wrong, Mac! It—it may seem strange to you, but I believed you had really been killed. Dad didn't, though. Dad believes a man doesn't die until his time comes, and he said your number wasn't up yet. He said right from the beginning there was something that smelled like skunk about the way Yancy handled your funeral. I thought he was trying to comfort me, and then when we got home last night, I found out differently.

"He ordered Bert Jordan to take a herd they were holding for market and push it straight across Double M to Cottonwood Hill. At first I thought as you did, that he was aiming to steal your grass, and then he told me he was just playing his hunch that you weren't dead. He said he was taking over as much of the Double M as he could, to hold it for you."

Mark felt muscle knotting in his cheek, and much as he desired to hold Anne Comstock in his arms—hold her for all time—he pushed her gently back from him. Words that he couldn't keep came from his lips.

"Which puts Ode in the same shoes my dad filled!" he said harshly. "Bait for the Bushwhack Syndicate."

Once the words were out, he wished that he hadn't spoken them. Frightening Anne would gain nothing, but her answer came bravely to him through the dark.

"I know," she murmured. "Yes, I know. I—I guess that's one reason I came back here tonight. I seemed to need you. I wanted to be close to you, even if you were dead."

She was in his arms again then, for one heartbreakingly heady moment, and her lips against his were wet with salt tears. They had been too young to speak of love when Mark McBride had left the valley of the Wolfkill, but the years had passed, and it seemed to Mark that there was a singing all through his blood now.

"We've wasted a lot of time," he said hoarsely. The words echoed grimly, and he forced the girl back from him again.

There could be no future for them or the Wolfkill, until the men who brought death in the dark were found and condemned. And the time for doing that was growing shorter by the minute, for if Ode Comstock had guessed that his funeral was faked, the men guilty of his father's murder might get the same idea. If they did, Yancy might receive a call this night, and torture, with death at its end, would likely force the truth from his lips. The old Texan and Comstock both, had to be warned at once of what to expect.

"Let's get your horse," he said quietly to the girl. "We're riding past the Double M, and on to your Circle C. I started out to make one kind of call on your dad tonight. Now we'll make a second try, and," he grinned crookedly, "this time I'll have thanks and a warning to hand him. Together, we'll fight this thing through!"

Above the sighing of the night breeze in the boughs of the cottonwoods that crowned this hill, came the sudden beat of hoofs rumbling along the road that led here. The sound of the trees had masked the approach of the riders until they were almost upon them. Swinging his head, Mark caught the confused blur of movement off along the road to his right.

He caught Anne Comstock's arm as the girl gasped.

"This way," he murmured. "Might be some of your dad's riders who picked up my trail out in the valley. . . . And it might not!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death-Call on Cottonwood Hill

AS THEY reached the cover of undergrowth edging the promontory where his grave had been so carefully constructed, a break in the cloudy sky let the moon shine through once more.

Mottled shadows lay upon the ground. Through them rushed the riders they had heard approaching. There were three of them. Colt in his hand, Mark pressed Anne behind him.

"They aren't dad's men," the girl's voice was a breath against his ear.

Mark nodded. Pain lay behind his eyeballs as he strained to identify the trio who were swinging down from creaking saddle-leather beside his grave. He saw the gleam of a shovel as one of the men handed it to another, and then the rasp of it biting into the earth came to them. They were uncovering his coffin!

Instant shock hit him. He knew the pair watching the grave-digger.

Beak-nosed Sam Kramer, a little man with vast ambition and shrewdness to match it, was one of them. Mark remembered when he had come into Wolfkill ten years before with a whiskey barrel and tin-cup on the back end of a rickety buckboard. People had laughed at the skinny, hawkish peddler then. Now they respected him as the town's leading saloonkeeper.

The man beside Kramer was as wide as an axe-handle, with the squat, powerful build of a grizzly. Jepp Howe was his name. Another ambitious man, he had expanded his ranch holdings year by year, until he now owned range equal to the Double M. Respected Wolfkill men,

Mark remembered that they were two Lobo Bill Yancy had mentioned as bucking the preacher's plan of forming a vigilante committee to patrol the valley.

A third man had also turned his voice against Reverend Trevey's plan. Lips tight, his glance swung once more to the shadowy grave-digger, and this time he recognized the man.

Sheriff Case Summers was the shoveler! Mark drew a ragged breath. He could see now why the law in Wolfkill Valley had made such little headway in locating old Red McBride's killer!

"Take a turn here, one of you hombres," the sheriff's harsh voice broke the run of Mark's thought. "Damned if I'm going to break my back on a fool chore like this. Yuh saw McBride's coffin set in here this afternoon. He's daid, I tell you!"

"You saw his coffin, friend Case," the purring voice belonged to wizened Sam Kramer, "but you did *not* see young McBride. The lid of the coffin was tightly screwed, as you'll remember. So we will dig up the coffin and smash the lid. Mistakes are costly things, and this is no time to make them. Jepp, your shoulders are broad, and your hands are strong. Let's see you work a while."

Case Summers was starting to step from the partially opened grave when the sound of another running horse came beating through the aisles of the cottonwoods. Mark heard the approaching mount, and he saw gun-steel glint suddenly in the hands of the three men in front of him. If Yancy was the one coming. . . . Mark cocked his own weapon, poised its muzzle shoulder-high. Then slowly he let the Colt sag, as the coming rider whipped recklessly into view through the moon-splotched dark.

At his back, Anne's fingers clawed suddenly at the prodigal's shoulders. Mark heard her gasp with surprise as she recognized the rider flinging himself from saddle beside the three men at the grave.

"Bert," she breathed. "Bert Jordan. One of them—"

Mark could understand the girl's shock. The hatchet-faced, tawny-haired newcomer was Ode Comstock's Circle C foreman!

"MAKE that dirt fly," Jordan was snapping without preamble. "Damnation and highwater, I'll swear I saw McBride, or his ghost, riding the valley tonight. So'd the rest of my crew.. He was with that cussed Lobo Bill. We hit out after 'em, but McBride seemed to settle right into the earth. Mebbe it was his ghost. . . ." the foreman's voice trailed off a little doubtfully.

"Ghosts don't ride hosses!" wizened Sam Kramer said icily. "And now, may I inquire what you and a Circle C crew were doing on Double M range tonight?"

"Comstock ordered me to throw a market herd clean to Cottonwood Hill here," Bert Jordan groaned the words, "and I had to do it. Damned if I ever thought the old man would whipsaw his old neighbor like that. It's something we never figured. . . ."

A curse as sharp as the bite of a knife slipped from the saloonman's lips. "So Comstock is trying to cut in on our play," he murmured thoughtfully. "You're right, Bert. It's something we hadn't figured on when I suggested we meet here this evening. Now I'll have to do some thinking while you boys dig."

Sam Kramer was not the only man here on Cottonwood Hill with thinking to do, Mark thought with grim irony as he put his mind to the task of planning his own next move. Soon the quartette out there around his grave would discover an empty coffin, and the trick bottom with the cave underneath.

Thought of that childhood cave brought a fresh line of reasoning into Mark's mind. If he could decoy the foursome into it, lead from his guns might hold them there until Anne could ride for Yancy and a Circle C crew.

Hooks on the ends of ropes were grappling for the handles of his coffin as Mark lifted slowly and started to turn to Anne, the scheme he had in mind on his lips.

"Coffin's damned light to be holdin' a corpse!" he heard the sheriff swear.

It made Mark aware that there were only minutes left for him to drop silently down to the hidden cave door, open it, and create a diversion that would excite the foursome into dropping down through the empty bottom of his grave.

"Ride—" the start of his instructions were on Mark's lips when Anne Comstock's lonesome mount whickered softly off to their left. Against the solitude of the night, a trumpet blast could have been no more devastating.

Mark saw the sheriff and Jepp Howe loose their grips on the ropes they were using to draw his coffin from the ground, and he heard their surprised yells as the weight of the pine box smashed through the light supports that had held it, and catapulted on into the cave beneath.

"No bottom to it—" Case Summers howled. "That cussed McBride has tricked us, and I'll lay yuh that's his hoss out there in the trees!"

As the sheriff shouted, Mark's hand had found Anne's shoulders. "Get away from me," he said urgently. "I'll draw their fire. Hit your bronc and ride for the Circle C. I'll be after you."

But even as he whispered the quick words, Mark knew he was lying, for this was one night when he would be glad to have the Bushwhack Syndicate following him, and the trail would *not* lead to the Circle C!

With Comstock's beef on Double M range, Red McBride's old friend, Ode, would be the immediate bait for that killer-crew out there at his grave-side.

Anne Comstock had the good sense not to protest. "Live for me, Mark!" she whispered, then she slipped sidewise behind the screen of undergrowth which had covered them.

Mark started counting seconds, pacing the girl's departure. Out by his grave, the sheriff had a pair of big Colts in his hands. All of the foursome were staring toward the source of that whicker they had heard in the night.

Suddenly the sheriff's bull-bellow broke the spell that had held them. "This is Case Summers," the man yelled. "If you are out there, Mark McBride, come in hyar with your hands up! You've got some explainin' to do. It's illegal around these parts to fool folks into believin' you are daid."

Sam Kramer's chilly voice whipped through the sheriff's talk. "You're wasting breath, Case. Get out there, you three, and bring McBride back here before he hits leather."

Like well-trained dogs taking a master's order, Mark saw Jepp Howe and the other two start at a lumbering run toward the circling trees. The sight knotted muscle in his cheeks. Sam Kramer was the leader of this killer syndicate, and if he let the other three get into the trees, it might be possible to make a run at Kramer and take him. Yet if the threesome got into the trees, they might reach Anne's mount before she could herself. It was a risk he dared not take. The girl's life meant more to him than Kramer.

"You're looking the wrong way, Sheriff!" Mark sent the mocking cry winging out to the killer quartette.

He caught a fading picture of the foursome whirling toward the sound of his voice, and then their guns were gashing flame at him through the dark. Like hail, bullets whipped through the brush on either side of him as he heard the sudden racket of hoofs departing through the night.

"He's got away, cuss him!" It was the sheriff's vindictive voice sounding off again.

"Not just yet, Case," Mark made his answer loud enough for them all to hear, and he slipped sidewise in the opposite direction from which the girl had just taken.

Gun palmed, he held his fire. As long as the flash of his own weapon didn't spotlight him, he had a chance of making it to Diablo without lead scarring him.

They were still trying to target him as he slipped along, and then Mark heard a curious sound. It was the groan of a man dying in mortal agony, and riding over it was the dry, raspy chuckle of Sam Kramer.

"Why it's Jepp," the saloonman's chilly drawl came through the dark. "I'm afraid he's dying, Case, so you might as well quit plugging the night full of holes. We won't need young Mister McBride now!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Circle C Round-up

FOR the space of a minute that seemed to stretch interminably, Mark paused in his crouched run toward Diablo. Silence lay over the site

of his grave. A silence that seemed louder than the roaring guns which had ceased their deadly talk. He couldn't see those men, but they were as still as himself, Mark knew—still, with a shocked cold wonder at Sam Kramer's words.

There was no doubt but what the saloonman had deliberately plowed lead into his own henchman. Why had he done it? And why, Mark asked himself, had he said the Bushwhack Syndicate would have no more interest in running to earth the ghost of Mark McBride?

It was a question that demanded an answer. An answer, Mark found, as the silence was broken, that he would not learn now.

Sam Kramer was saying out there in the dark: "Yes, Jepp is dead, boys. Too bad we can't bury him right here, but I think it wiser to load him on his horse. Tie him on good, Case. We've got a ride to make in a hurry."

The saloonman was chuckling again, and the sound touched Mark's nerves like the dry raspy warning of a diamondback rattler.

"You're a cold devil, Sam," Case Summers' voice was hoarse. He sounded like a man shaken to his roots. "What're you aimin'—?"

"Hurry it up!" Kramer snapped. "I said we had some riding to do. We can talk as we move."

It was the last Mark heard any of them say. They seemed to have lost complete interest in him. Saddle leather creaked in the night as the dead Jepp Howe was loaded into his kak, and a minute later the rest of them were mounting. Hoofs scrabbling over rough ground, Mark saw the dark riders pound back the way they had come.

A deep breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding, pushed from his lungs. What plan, he asked himself again, had Sam Kramer brewed? There was no answer, and that fact hit him like a hot spur as he tightened the girth about Diablo.

Kramer, Bert Jordan, and the bulky sheriff were already almost beyond earshot when Mark swung to leather.

Steel touching Diablo's flanks, the big black lengthened into a lope on their trail. Lurking among the trees, like the ghost he had all but become, Mark watched Kramer's night-riders sweep out into the luminous, rolling swales of the Wolfkill. When they were nothing but a faint blur in the night ahead of him, Mark let Diablo into the open.

If the clouds held, he was safe in following Kramer's crew and the grisly burden they carried. If the clouds broke and light showed him behind them, Mark knew, he'd make another passenger for them to carry on their mysterious ride down the Wolfkill.

That was a chance he'd have to take. This night might yet see freedom or bondage for every Wolfville citizen and rancher in the valley.

Miles rolled beneath the hoofs of the racing mounts ahead. Mark kept them in view, gambling with death at every stride of the black beneath him. Questions kept pace with his rush through the night. What twisted motive had been in the saloonkeeper's mind when he had murdered his companion? Where were they taking the man now? What earthly aid could a body be to them?

Those were questions that put a tension between his shoulders, and then there was another startling one to add to the list. Hardly able to credit his eyes, Mark saw six riders lift above the rim of a barranca to the right, and swing in to join the trio ahead.

As though sensing their need for stealth, Diablo was heeling toward brush on the left even as he twitched the reins, and brought the big animal to a halt.

In the sudden silence, faint words drifted thinly back to him. Sheriff Case Summers was voicing as crooked a tale as a man might ever hear. "Got bad news for you JH boys," he told Jepp Howe's crew, the riders who had lifted from the barranca. "Your boss is dead—shot down by Ode Comstock and that cussed Double M Texican, ol' Lobo Bill Yancy. Bert, hyar, got suspicious when Comstock ordered him to throw a market herd onto Double M grass after that night-riding Syndicate who've been bushwhacking valley folks polished off young McBride.

"He sent word tuh town tonight of Comstock's move, and that's why we picked up Jepp on our way out, and brought you boys along to wait here for

us, in case we got the deadwood on Comstock and wanted to throw his herd back to Circle C grass.

"Wa'al," the sheriff continued, and Mark could understand that the lawman was warming to his task, "Jepp got separated from us, and come on Comstock and Yancy. Bert was too far off to stop the killing, but he'll swear on the stand that he saw Comstock draw and drive lead into yore boss's back while he was palavering with Yancey!"

"Boys," a crisp voice that Mark guessed belonged to Hake Parsons, JH foreman, answered for them all. "I guess that's enough for me!"

"We'll never take the old lobo alive!" Sam Kramer's voice warned them all. "Case, deputize all these men. When we ride into the Circle C, unlimber your irons!"

★

THE group was no more than a hundred yards ahead, dark blurs in the night. Mark studied them, and he felt the same icy calm that had possessed him when he had sat in a California college classroom taking final examinations. Those days seemed far away from the blood and death and twisted lies that lived here in the Wolfkill. And yet this battle was grimmer than anything he had ever imagined.

He saw now why Sam Kramer had murdered his companion. It was to enlist the aid of Hake Parsons and his JH crew as pawns, to pull the Devil's chestnuts out of the fire. If this bloody work went through according to Kramer's schedule, he and the sheriff and the turncoat Bert Parsons would add the JH, the Circle C to the Double M range they already coveted. That empire would bring them the power to control the Wolfkill and the new rail spur reaching toward the valley.

Low across the neck of Diablo, he slanted off to the left, slowly at first, in hopes that he could gain ground before the others finished their talk.

But the moon played no favorites. Its light broke suddenly into the open as the clouds parted. Mark heard cries as he was seen. Behind him, they sounded like the sharp yelps of coyotes, and then, as he fed steel into Diablo's flanks, lead started reaching for him.

Bending low over the black's neck, he heard the whine of bullets close above his head, and Hake Parsons' voice cry: "That is McBride's horse!"

"He's dead, you fool!" Sam Kramer's acid answer was the last Mark heard, for Diablo had dipped beyond a swale that hid him from his pursuers.

They would be close after him, though, all the way to the Circle C. Sam Kramer would see to that if it meant running their horses to death, for the wizened Syndicate chief would know that he'd overheard their talk and was riding to warn Comstock.

Warn him? The thought brought a mirthless chuckle to Mark's lips. He was going to join them. Join an old Texican, a girl, and a Chinese cook handier with a cleaver than rifle, against nine men, murder-bent!

One hope came to him as he raced toward the dark bulk of the Circle C ranch house. The crew prodding Comstock beef onto Double M range might have returned by now. They would fight for Anne and her grizzled Texican dad to the last drop of their blood.

But the hope faded as he curved at a run into the yard of the sprawling log ranch house. The bunkhouse off to the right, and the corrals and barns to the left, lay dark and deserted.

He saw a wide door beneath the overhang of the porch roof swing open at the thundering run of his approach. Comstock, a brawny man grown heavy with seventy years living, stood framed in the opening.

"McBride!" Mark identified himself as his stiff legs lifted him to the steps. Like an echo came a long rattle of hoofs from behind him.

"So it took my daughter to resurrect you, eh?" Ode Comstock rumbled as Mark reached the porch. "My—"

Mark's urgent fingers caught the rancher's shoulder and drew him back into the big main room. "Shut that door," he snapped, "or there'll be lead coming through it in two minutes. Jepp Howe's murdered, and Kramer's laid the killing on your doorstep!"

Wide-eyed, Anne came through an inner doorway. Mark glanced at her.

He had lost his hat. His face had aged years in the space of hours. Gaunt lines gashed from the corners of his nostrils to lips. "Get Wong," he snapped. "Tell him to shutter every window. You bring what guns and ammunition you've got handy. Summers, Kramer, your foreman Jordan, and a kill-crazy JH crew are on my heels. Its fight, or die at the end of a rope, Ode!"

✶

MARK was moving toward the heavy shutters that would close the wide front windows when bullets from riders pounding into the yard splattered glass over him. Mark felt a sliver slash his cheek and blood trickled into his mouth. He spat it across the jagged sill, and yelled over his shoulder to Ode Comstock who had snatched a Winchester from wall pegs, and was leveling it around the doorcase.

"The first rush will be the worst. Break it up, and we've got a chance!"

Comstock tossed his white head. "Don't be tellin' your uncle how to suck aigs," he roared, and the rifle bucked in his hands. "I've fit off twicet this many Sioux single-handed!" The rifle bucked again.

Mark fired methodically through the broken window, and answering lead howled in on either side of him. The lamp lighting this room went out, and he felt Anne crawl close to him. She shoved a cool Winchester into his hand.

"I'll load your Colt," she said steadily.

Mark levered a shell into the fresh weapon, and steadied its long barrel across the window sill. A black moving mass, Kramer's riders were racing across the yard in a wide, thin line. Every plunging step of their mounts was bringing them closer to the porch.

Carefully, Mark squeezed the trigger. Shots had to count now. At the report of his rifle, he saw one horse in that thin line seem to stand straight on its head. Its rider flew from saddle in a long, curving arc.

Ode had dropped another horse, and its rider, too, was pinwheeling through the air. Glass crashed in the window on the opposite side of the door, and Mark heard Wong chattering in his own singsong tongue. A terrific blast of flame lighted the whole porch as the Chinese pulled both triggers on an old double-barreled shotgun that usually reposed above the mantel.

"Blue whistlers and hell! That's the stuff to give 'em Wong!" he yelled encouragingly.

The cook's voice came plaintively back to him. "Give him to me, too, you bet. Shoulda all samee mule-kicked!"

That shotgun blast had peppered more than one rider and horse. Animals started to mill uncontrollably. The first rush had been broken, fifty short paces from the porch. Riders were wheeling away now to either side, circling back along the edges of the yard. Mark heard Kramer's rasping voice screaming orders that he couldn't make out. Sweat stung his eyes and he swiped at it with smoke-grimed fingers.

From the darkness to his right, he heard Anne cry out suddenly. "Mark, Mark, dad's down!"

Cursing under his breath, Mark turned from the window, and groped his way to the door. Dropping to his knees, he heard Comstock mutter. "Ain't nothin'. Hand me my iron, girl, and git me propped up. We'll show them whelps how the Circle C fights!"

But it was no use. Shielding the flame as best he could, Mark struck a match and made a hasty examination. Blood was oozing from an ugly hole high in the old Texan's right shoulder. He'd lost enough already to redden half of his shirt.

"We've got to get your dad to a doctor, pronto!" Mark told Anne bluntly, and as he looked up he realized that he could see the girl's face in a dim red glow that seemed to be coming from behind him. He watched her eyes grow wide, and saw that she was staring at something across his shoulder.

Wheeling toward the porch, Mark stiffened. Out there across the yard, Kramer's men had wheeled a buckboard loaded with loose straw from the wagon barn. They had fired it, and already flames were eating into the straw. Another ten seconds and they would start pushing that wagon

across the yard to lodge it against the dry wood of the porch.

"They're going to burn us out!" Anne whispered. "Mark, what—?"

He wasn't listening to the girl. Into his mind had come a picture of himself fleeing on Diablo away from Kramer and the JH riders. Hake Parsons had recognized Diablo, and he remembered that Kramer had been quick to remind the JH segundo that Mark McBride was dead. For some reason the wizened night-rider didn't want the JH foreman to learn the secret of that empty grave on Cottonwood Hill.

"Mebbe," Mark spoke the word half to himself, "If the ghost of Mark McBride should come to life right sudden, it would be a big surprise to some of those gents out there."

"Mark, what do you mean?" Anne asked urgently.

He answered with a thin, tight smile. "I can't say as I rightly know myself, but if there's a weak link in Kramer's scheme its Hake Parsons and his JH crew. You and Wong get your dad fixed up for travel. I'm going out and have a talk with those hombres!"

"You—you can't. We'll fight the fire with—"

Mark lifted to his feet. Already they were starting to push the flaming buckboard across the yard. "It's all I can do, Anne," he said tightly, and stepped to the porch.

*

LIGHT from the flaming straw lit the yard from side to side, now, like a red lake in the darkness. Mark moved down the steps, and his tall, black clad figure was outlined sparely in the red light.

One shot howled in his direction, but he kept up his steady march toward the rolling buckboard.

A voice from the group behind it cried harshly: "Hold your fire, Sam. That ain't Comstock, and he's the man we're after. This feller. . . !"

Mark raised his empty right hand. He had purposefully left his Colt behind. "Quit that wagon," he called, "and come

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on forward, you men. Don't worry," he added acidly. "I'm not pullin' you into range of house lead that would fix up the ghost of Mark McBride quicker than it would you!"

"McBride?" The voice was Hake Parsons. "Dammit, I knew that was you out on the plain. Come on, JH," he added grimly. "We're going to palaver this gent and see howcome ghosts manage to

Anne Comstock

jump outa their coffins. Sam, you and Case come along, too. This talk ought to be right good!"

Mark was thinking fast as he paused silently before the group that had swung around in front of the buckboard. Bert Jordan stood behind the sheriff and Kramer, who were grouped together.

Mark noticed how carefully the blunt-faced Hake Parson and his crew avoided the traitorous Comstock foreman. The sight brought an edge of excitement into him. He hadn't misjudged the JH crew.

They were in this thing out of loyalty to a man who was just a lumpy shape aboard a horse in the background. They were ready to hang Ode Comstock only because they believed the sheriff and Kramer had told them the truth, not because of any lust for another man's blood or range.

One of the JH crew muttered: "It's McBride, all right."

Blood from his gashed cheek had dried in the stubble along one side Mark's gaunt face, and pulled his mouth into a caricature of a grin. "The ghost of Mark McBride," he corrected. "Some of me died when my dad crossed the river. The rest of me died this afternoon."

Wizened Sam Kramer pushed his narrow face forward, and his body crouched a little. "What is this, McBride? What is this? You're alive, all right! Ghosts don't ride black horses, and spill lies!"

Tension was crawling in the yard like rising fever. Mark sensed it, and he answered the saloonkeeper almost lightly. "You ought to know, Sam. You and Jepp Howe and the sheriff opened my grave tonight and found an empty coffin."

"And a blasted damned cave beneath it," Sheriff Case Summers blurted.

"Shut up, Case!" Like a whip, Kramer laid that command across the sheriff. "What tomfoolery you talking? We were not within five miles of Cottonwood Hill tonight."

But the sheriff's remark had struck home to the taut, puzzled Howe riders. Mark saw bewilderment strike some of their faces, and he slapped sudden, harsh words at Kramer. "You were there, Sam. I can prove my grave was opened because I was there, too. And I can show these men Jepp Howe's blood beside it!

"I heard your talk tonight to the JH, branding Comstock his murderer. You claim to have found Howe's body on Double M range. A man bleeds when he's shot in the back. Suppose you take us and show us where the killing took place. Show us Jepp's blood on Double M grass if you can. If you can't, I'll show it to you on Cottonwood Hill!"

"We're wasting time with this talk!" Kramer's voice was a roar.

Hake Parsons laid his own voice into the conversation. "I ain't so sure we are," he said deliberately.

Eyes watching Kramer, Mark drove his point home. "I've showed you my good faith by coming out here without a gun on my hip. I'll surrender myself to you, Parsons, and prove to you that your friend Kramer here shot your boss. Know how I can do it?"

"You can't," Kramer snapped.

Mark looked down at the saloonkeeper's small, narrow boots, and said convincingly: "You pulled a lot of soft dirt out of my grave tonight. And you were standing in it, Sam, when you shot Jepp in the back. Your prints and his blood are up there, side by side! If you're so damned innocent hand over your guns to Parsons and ride with us. One of us will prove our point."

"No man touches my guns!" the saloonman's voice rasped, and his hands were whipping suddenly toward the black Colts at his thighs.

There were other riders racing in

through the night, but Mark hardly heard them. All his pent-up hatred for this man who had killed his own father was in the spring he made toward the night-rider.

One of Kramer's Colts blared almost in his face, and he felt spent powder sear his cheeks, then his weight was crushing Kramer to the yard. Right fist clubbed, he sledged mercilessly at the saloonman's face. Once for Red McBride, once for Ode Comstock, and once for himself. He felt Kramer's body grow lax beneath him.

Confusion was reigning in the yard now. Above the thunder of approaching hoofs, old Lobo Bill Yancy's rebel yell rang clear. "Come on, you fightin' Vigilantes. We got all our fish in one basket here. Ask the sheriff why he warn't at your church meetin' tonight, Parson. Ask Sam Kramer whar he spends his evenings. . . ."

Two riders were breaking wildly away from the yard of Wolfkill men. Jordan was one of them; Case Summers, the other.

"After 'em!" Hake Parsons order to his JH crew was venomous. "Only guilty coyotes would tuck tail and run!"

Anne Comstock was on one side him, and a grinning Lobo Bill Yancy on the other as Mark rose from beside the man his fists had knocked out.

"Knew trouble was on the make when I j'ined the parson's meetin' tonight and Kramer and the sheriff warn't there," Yancy was saying. "So I took me a chance and told folks about yore turnin' into a live ghost to track Wolfkill night-riders. I invited 'em all to ride out to Cottonwood Hill with me to prove it. Found blood beside yore grave, and Jepp Howe's hat, which fell off where sign said they'd roped him on his saddle. Then we heerd shots from way off this way and come high-tailin' it.

"Son," he finished with a smile, "I never see an hombre come back from the dead as quick as you, but I got a hunch there'll be a lot of folks mighty glad you have, includin'—" he cast a glance at the girl—"a lass wearin' the Comstock brand."

THE END

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JOHN IRONS' TICKET TO HELL

As shrewd as he was, not even John Irons, Association lawman, could have known that the cowboy he'd sided in that odds-on gun-fight was the same youngster he'd sworn to bring back, dead or alive, for the shoot-in-the-back murder of John's best friend!

CHAPTER ONE

Train to Ten Trees

IN THE dust-covered archives of the Western Anti-Horse and Cow Thief Association—the only existing authentic chronicle of the wanderings of Sudden John Irons—there rests a musty, dog-eared manila folder across which has been scrawled the legend, "Case un-

The Chilcotes had imported gunmen from south of the Platte. . . .

A Sudden John Irons Novel

By DEE LINFORD

closed." Then, evidence that the writer had at some later date changed his mind, these words have been crossed out, and "Case closed" is written in the same vigorous hand below. The correction is initialed "R. McD.," signifying, of course, Oregon Rob McDade, Western Anti's two-fisted secretary and nemesis of stock thieves from the Pecos to the Platte.

The folder is entitled, laconically, "The Case of the Cobblestone Pool."

But John Irons called it "The *Curse* of the Cobblestone Pool" the night he heard the ugly story in McDade's Cheyenne office.

Oregon Rob had smiled his deceptive, cherubic smile. "You kin call it what you want," he'd said, and his voice was as deceivingly soft as his smile, "jest so you call it closed, time I see your homely face in town agin."

John Irons lifted one eyebrow in wary surprise. "You said Fronce Ryan was lookin' after Western Anti, up in the Ten Trees Hills."

McDade's mud-brown eyes caught and held his assistant's steady gray gaze, and his thick finger tapped a telegram on the desk between them. "Fronce Ryan is dead," he said, his voice rattling in his throat like wind under dead leaves. "Fronce was picked up a couple of days ago, on the Cobblestone range. He was shot in the back—an' three weeks dead!"

John Irons sat up sharply on his straight-backed chair, and his hands brushed the grips of his guns without his knowing it. There was a saying in the rangeland that Western Anti always got its man. And when one of its representatives lost his life in the line of duty, there was no rest, no easing up or even any sleep for any man in the organization until the murderer was brought to justice.

It was a tradition, and a prideful and useful one. John Irons could see where the bee was falling this time, and he was proud and thankful that it was so.

Fronce Ryan for many years had been his colleague in the organization, and there had been a bond between them which had gone deeper than mere affection. Fronce Ryan had saved John Irons' life more than once, and vice versa. Each had long been pledged to see the other through in case of something like this.

A big question remained in John Irons' mind. But before he could speak it, Oregon Rob rattled the cowbell on the desk between them, and Mike Howe, Association handyman, poked his bald head into the room, like a dog to his master's whistle.

"A Denver & Western freight is leavin' town t'night," McDade said, "on accommodation run to Ten Trees. John here will be on that freight. An', beginnin' now, you kin charge his time an' expense to the case o' the—uh—the *curse* o' the Cobblestone Pool.

Then, whipping his brown eyes back at his lean inspector-at-large, Oregon Rob in eight words supplied the answer to the question which still burned in John Irons' mind. "John, I want that Cobblestone war stopped. An' I want Jim Chilcote—*dead or alive!*"

There were other questions on John Irons' tongue. But something in the executive secretary's bulldog face hinted that the interview was over. Anyhow, he knew what he needed to know worst. He could learn the rest himself, first hand.

"I'll be on that train, Rob," he said. "An' I'll bring in Jim Chilcote, dead or alive!"

Twenty minutes after leaving McDade's office, John Irons had his bedroll spread on the spare bunk in the caboose at the rear of the long puddle-jumper freight. The conductor, a billious, one-eyed man, was not given to talk, and the only other passenger was a tow-haired cowboy already asleep on one of the bunks, so John Irons stretched out on his own bed and closed his eyes. But sleep was impossible on the hard, crow-hopping bench, and as the long night wore on, he had ample time to reflect on what he'd heard that evening concerning the job that awaited him, in the war-torn Ten Trees Hills.

★

THE Cobblestone affair, it appeared, was another case of a small-scale rancher getting big ideas and going all-hog-or-none against his neighbors. Old Chandler Chilcote, John Irons knew, had long been a trusted and highly respected leader on the Cobblestone range in the Ten Trees Hills.

Chan Chilcote had organized the small Cobblestone ranchers like himself into a militant association to hold the grass-rich Cobblestone range for their joint use. And the Cobblestone Pool had long stood as a monument to the workability and fairness of the pool system. Then, unexpectedly, this Chilcote and his wild-haired son, Jim, had gone hog-wild and turned on their neighbors like curly wolves.

The Chilcotes, father and son, had started by dynamiting Barrel Spring, principal water hole on the Cobblestone range, closing half of that rich grassland to cattle grazing. They had been caught in the act and read out of the Pool. But old Chan had had drag enough in the association he'd founded to take a part of the members out with him, and to split the Pool wide open.

The Chilcote faction, it seemed, had been strong enough to hold its half of the Cobblestone range—the watered half—at gun-point. The remaining ranchers, deprived of water and therefore of range, had been closed out, and the Chilcote crowd had come out on top. Then, just when these were congratulating themselves for having picked a winner, the powerhouse squeeze was turned mercilessly against themselves, and they'd found themselves out in the cold.

The Chilcote crowd had been building a barbwire barrier to protect their range from ruined neighbors, when one of the postholes filled up, mysteriously with oil. Word had gotten around, and the resulting stampede of wildcat oilmen and get-rich speculators had ruined the surviving members of the Cobblestone Pool—all but the Chilcotes.

The latter seemed to have seen the catastrophe coming. They had cut down operations before disaster struck. The Chilcotes had squeezed through, while their less fortunate associates went down fighting to hold their range against the government-backed oil leases.

When the whole of the Cobblestone range lay under lease, it was found that the "strike" was processed petroleum from a Casper refinery. And when the bubble had burst, the Chilcotes had set about buying up the worthless leases, cheap. Within a year, the Chilcotes' Anchor Ox controlled all the ground formerly grazed by the Cobblestone Pool. The Chilcotes, father and son, were on the make!

But then, as if Fate itself had taken a hand, a bona fide oil strike was made on

the Cobblestone range. The government, in selling the oil-leased land to the Anchor Ox, had wisely withheld oil and mineral rights, and the Chilcotes at last were left holding the bag.

The Chilcotes, caught like coyotes in their own trap, had imported gunmen from south of the Platte to hold their rangeland against the money-mad boomers. But the vengeful Cobblestone Pool had grabbed off the best active leases, and the Chilcotes had already taught the poolers how to fight. The Pool had imported its own gunmen, and the Anchor Ox had been doomed from the first.

Old Chan Chilcote himself had died under the guns of the pooler Regulators and young Jim, refusing to admit defeat, had taken to the Ten Trees Hills with the remnants of his curly wolf crew to continue the fight from there.

"What's it got to do with Western Anti?" John Irons had demanded of McDade. "We're a *stockman's* protective league. "Why we got to pull a oil comp'ny's peanuts outa the fire?"

Oregon Rob had looked troubled and grave. "This here Sam Blazzard that's headin' the Pool now is canny," he'd explained. "The Cobblestone Pool's a oil company, open an' shut. But Blazzard was long-headed enough to keep it incorporated as a stockman's pool. An' he's dug up the pool's life membership in Western Anti. Now that Jim Chilcote is raidin' outa the Ten Trees Hills like a crazy Injun, burnin' rigs an' dynamitin' wells, Sam Blazzard needs help. An' he's makin' us live up to our pledge o' protection. I'm 'feared to renege, John. It would cost us many a payin' member."

John Irons still hadn't been convinced at that point. But learning that Fronce Ryan had already ridden up to give Sam Blazzard the protection he demanded—and learning that Ryan had already been shot in the back—John Irons was converted. It was Western Anti's fight, all right, now. It was *his*—John Irons'—fight, too. He would bring his colleague's murderer to justice, or he would die trying. . . .

* * *

John Irons must have slept without knowing it. For he was aroused from a bad dream by the screech of braked locomotive wheels on the iron rails and a solid push that ran backward through the long string of cars—a shove that popped the light caboose at the rear in the way that an artful whacker could pop the snapper at the end of his long mulewhip.

Invisible hands picked John Irons up off his bunk and slammed him to the floor. The grunting conductor lit crosswise of his head in the dark, then got to his feet muttering apologies and deprecations at the lantern he could not find.

Finding it at last, he got it lighted and stepped out into the night to investigate the reason behind the sudden stop. But before he left, plunging the interior of the small railroad caboose into darkness once more, John Irons had a glimpse of the towheaded cowboy sitting upright on his bunk, dragging a Winchester from his saddle pack.

Harsh voices sounded outside then, and John Irons knew there was trouble brewing along the railroad that night. Then the cowboy spoke, confirming his hunch.

"Better fade, stranger," the towhead said, calmly as if asking for a smoke. "It's me they want, an' I got no chance. They'd shoot me like a rabbit if I tried to jump. But that ain't nothin' to do with you. You better get out while you can."

John Irons did not comprehend. But he smelled trouble smoking right under his long nose, and the smell was not an alien one. Getting to his feet, he groped his way to his bunk and buckled on his heavy gun-belts. The voices outside were nearer now, more threatening and ominous in their tone. A line of light glowed suddenly beneath the caboose door, and he saw the cowboy had spoken the truth. If he were going to get out, he hadn't much time.

Shrugging faintly in the blackness, he opened the caboose door and looked out. The sight which met his eyes was not a pleasant one.

CHAPTER TWO

Men Without Faces

UPWARDS of a dozen ghoulish figures stood in a wide semicircle about the rear of the caboose. Two of them carried lighted lanterns, and in

the yellowish light John Irons could see they all were heavily armed. Then he saw what was so strange in their appearance. They had no faces! All wore flour sacks over their heads, with holes cut for their eyes and mouths. The eyes behind the sack cloth reflected the lantern light like live fires.

"Get out!" the cowboy whispered hoarsely, "an' shut that door!"

John Irons obeyed, and as he stepped onto the caboose platform, rough hands seized him and pulled him over the railing to the ground. He struggled to free himself, and a pistol barrel slammed against his head. The ring of faceless men gyrated, and the lanterns made a complete circle of fire around him. When things steadied again, his arms were pinioned, and one of the masked figures was holding a light close to his face.

This man towered above the others, and seemed to be leader of the band. And if John Irons ever saw murder in a pair of eyes, he saw it in the eyes that burned behind the mask.

"This ain't him!" the faceless man growled, as if the sin were John Irons' own. Then he stepped behind the Association man, shoved a gun into his back, and marched him down the road grade to the bar-pit.

"Lissen, fella," the big man growled, halting him under the Cheyenne-Casper telegraph wires that paralleled the tracks, "them wires run south—to Cheyenne an' Denver an' as much farther as you wanna go. Stay under 'em, an' keep walkin' till you're outa this country. Stop this side o' Cheyenne, an' you're a-goin' to wish you'd a-died when you was a pup. Now git. An' don't look back!"

John Irons still had his guns—either by reason of his captor's oversight or overconfidence—and he obeyed the command without hesitation or retort, thinking only to get out of sight before the masked man changed his mind and disarmed him. The railroad and the paralelling wires curved around the point of a low hill within a hundred yards, and John Irons stretched his legs toward that point.

Once around that point and out of sight of the caboose, he left the wires and doubled back through the brush on the hillside. He could see, on pushing his head cautiously above the rise, what had stopped the train so abruptly.

A big fire had been kindled between the rails ahead of the locomotive, and this was still burning. Then the caboose was in sight again, and he hunkered down to watch.

The big night raider, it was plain, had already forgotten him. He was back now at the caboose, directing operations against the lone man imprisoned inside the rickety railroad crummy. His gun was still in his hand, and sulphurous invective flowed from his mouth.

"You comin' out?" he demanded of the caboose, "or do we got to come for yu'?"

The trapped cowboy fired through the caboose door for answer, and one of the hooded men spun halfway around, clawing at his shoulder. The big man signalled a rush up the platform steps. But the Winchester inside stuttered and crashed, and three more masked men went down before they'd touched the platform steps. Falling back, the others opened fire on the caboose. Their lead made a sieve of the old box-on-wheels. But the rifle inside would not be silenced.

Then the big man's voice boomed above the raving clamor of the guns. "Part of yu' keep the door covered. Rest of yu' gather brush an' pile it along the box. We'll smoke him outa there like a polecat!"

"You can't burn the train!" one of the band objected.

But the leader waved the objection aside. "Train, hell! We'll burn it an' all the track b'tween here an' Ten Trees, if we have to. He ain't goin' to slip through our fingers agin!"

John Irons heard the name Ten Trees with surprise. It told him he must already be on Cobblestone Pool range. And it told him something else, something which followed indisputably from the other. The faceless, ghoulish raiders who conspired to burn the trapped cowboy alive inside the caboose would be Jim Chilcote's Anchor Ox night-riders. The big man would be young Chilcote in person, directing another murder. . . .

The probability became a certainty as he considered it, and the blood coursed a little faster in his veins. Before him, be-

hind those unsightly white masks, stood the men—the *man,* at least—who had murdered Fronce Ryan! Fate had crossed their trails early in the game.

But all in the same thought, he realized the hopelessness of his position. He still had his guns, but the odds if he opened the pot would be a dozen to one against him. He might kill Jim Chilcote, all right. But he would be certain to die himself. And the game cowhand inside the caboose would die also.

Suddenly, saving the life of the plucky tow-haired cowboy who had in some way incurred the wrath of the Anchor Ox had become more immediately important to John Irons than the taking of Chilcote. wriggling and writhing snakelike through the shallow cover, he gained the shelter of the cars undetected.

The needle-sharp boiler cinders cut and slashed his elbows and knees as he dragged himself back toward the caboose, under the cars. Twice, discovery seemed inescapable, and he stopped and lay low, his hands gripping his guns, determined to make a fight of it. But luck was with him. Anyhow, the raiders had forgotten him and expected no interference—not, at least, from under the train. And, after what seemed an eternity, he reached the end of the last car.

The gap between the car and the trailing caboose was, to his immense relief,

WHEN BILL COMES BACK. . . . Yes, we'll have sort of a choked-up throat when we see that soldier swing off the train—home to stay, this time! But meanwhile, let's make sure he *does* come back—he and thousands of other Bills—by giving them the best fighting equipment of any army in the world! War Savings Bonds help buy the tools to win the war. Let's give more than the 10%! Bill needs it—right now!

There'd be time later to deal with the outlaw. But, for the game cowboy who had ordered John Irons out of the trap set for him time was running out. Half a dozen raiders were pumping lead through the caboose door to keep the tow-head inside, while the others collected brush and heaped it high against the old box-on-wheels.

John Irons considered circling ahead to the locomotive and warning the engineer what was up, so that the hoghead could throw the train into reverse and move the cowboy back to safety. But then he saw the train crew had been taken prisoner, and was being held under heavy guard beside the wheezing engine.

But the plan, in dying, suggested another. The train had been stopped on a steep up-grade. The gradient was sufficient that if the caboose were to be cut loose from the cars, it would roll backward under its own weight!

Keeping low, taking advantage of every rock and brush clump, John Irons circled the caboose and cut back toward the train, midway up the line of cars. It was a dangerous maneuver, but weeds and brush grew thick over the right-of-way, and, well-screened now by brush piles on either side. But even as he congratulated himself, the big man's voice boomed a command, and the brush on both sides of him was ignited.

THE tinder-dry sward crackled and popped as it took fire, and the flames rose quickly on both sides, licking hungrily at the incendiary sage and greasewood. For an instant he felt like a rabbit trapped in a burning box. Then he heard the raiders retreating to safe distance, and he came up crouching beside the iron car coupling.

He could see the coupling plainly in the glow from the mounting fire, and triumph surged wild inside him. The union was of an old-fashioned cast, consisting simply of a sandwich joint secured by a heavy iron pin. The hookup was worn and loosely fitted, and the impact of the sudden stop had knocked the joiner pin halfway up out of the union. The entire weight of the caboose seemed to be resting against the cocked pin bolt, but it came out readily when he tugged at it.

And then he could see why. The crummy was cut loose from the train now. But it didn't move. One of the wheels, John Irons guessed, might have been flattened slightly by that abrupt stop. And John Irons was trapped, along with the tow-headed cowboy!

Full realization of his predicament was staggering. The roaring flames on both sides of him were leaping skyward now, licking at the sides of the caboose and the car ahead, reaching for Sudden John himself with darting, whip-pointed tongues. The smoke was blinding, and the heat seared his flesh. If he stayed where he was another five minutes, he'd be barbecue. If he jumped through the flames to safety, he'd meet death from the raiders' guns.

He was struggling mightily with himself to keep a level head when his hurting eyes focused suddenly on a crack in the caboose wall. It was an inch wide and must extend clear through the thin box, to the inside. An idea flashed into his desperately devising brain, and he pressed his mouth to the crack.

"Don't shoot me through this crack, cowboy," he called, loud enough to be heard inside the box but not by the raiders beyond the flames. "I'm yore friend. Open the door like you was goin' to make a break. Don't show yoreself. Just start a fuss that'll draw 'em to that end o' the caboose. An' maybe we'll get outa this!"

There was only silence from inside the crummy, and John Irons feared he was too late—that the cowboy was dead. Then he heard boots scrape the floor inside, and the door screaked open. The cowboy yelled, a wild Indian yell, and the Winchester was crashing as fast as the tow-head could work it.

John Irons grinned, in spite of the pain from the searing flames. The towhead was one to ride the river with! Then he heard the big man's voice, directing attention to the caboose door, and he knew his moment had come. Standing upright and holding his breath, to avoid breathing in the lethal smoke and flames, he placed his back against the caboose, his feet against the car ahead, and straightened, slowly.

He knew later that under ordinary circumstances he could not have done it. But just then, with the fire licking at his clothes and flesh, every tortured muscle and sinew had the strength of ten. Slowly but surely, the caboose moved backward. The gap between it and the stationary car widened, until John Irons fell flat to his back upon the cinder-strewn grade. And the flaming brush tumbled in on him from either side.

The cowboy's diversion must have worked well, or else the raiders, seeing a man spring up from the very heart of the fire, could not believe their eyes. For John Irons bounded up. And, in full view of them all, he caught the near side of the metal ladder running up the near side of the caboose, and swung himself aboard the moving car—without drawing a shot!

Only when he was lying flat, face down, on the roof of the shack-on-wheels, did the surprised raiders come to life. Even then they didn't shoot. Instead, they surged forward as one man to halt the runaway caboose. But John Irons had anticipated such a maneuver and was ready for it. He had a gun in either hand, and he cut loose with a sudden thunderous fire. His guns were trained at the ground, but the whining slugs kicked cinders and ash in the pursuers' faces, and they took the hint. They were yelling when they abandoned the chase and scattered, for cover.

Once safely in the brush, the raiders opened a murderous fire. Lead riddled the caboose's thin shell and filled the air above John Irons' head with a vicious, spiteful *whurr*. But the cowboy was on the platform, firing his Winchester again, and the bonfire on the tracks was receding rapidly as the runaway car gathered momentum. Soon the caboose had lumbered around the curve which had shielded John Irons once before that evening, and they were in the clear.

The raiders pursued them beyond the turn. But by now runaway caboose was out of all but rifle range, and in the space of a minute they had completely lost the faceless men and the bonfire.

By then, the speed of the unwieldy car had become a fear-inspiring thing. It lurched abruptly in rounding an invisible curve, and almost hurled John Irons into space. Taking thought for the first time

in several seconds, he holstered his guns and clawed at the brake wheel, screwing it down as fast as he could, hoping to stop, or at least to reduce, the breath-taking speed of the lumbering car.

There was no way of telling how fast the loose caboose was running, but it was plainly far out of control. Already, John Irons had the brake-wheel screwed down as far as it would go, and was holding it down by main strength. But his efforts seemed to have no effect. He could smell the overheated brake shoes, and the wheels were throwing scintillant streams of sparks out into the black. But the grade seemed to fall away sharper and sharper beneath the wheels, and the vehicle seemed to run faster instead of slower.

How many miles were covered in that crazy flight, John Irons was never to know. Crouching there beside the brake wheel and peering futilely into the black void ahead, he knew only that he had traded one form of sure death for another.

The free-running car had become a witless, fire-shod monster, roaring madly and blindly to destruction. There would have to come another curve in the invisible tracks soon, and John Irons knew the rickety old vehicle would never negotiate it. Not at its present speed. And the effort of holding the brake shoes against the racing wheels was becoming too great for his aching arms to endure. Soon he'd have to turn the runaway caboose loose entirely, and then the infernal chariot wouldn't need a curve to fly the track. It would soar sky-high of its own accord, and smash itself to matchwood on the rocks.

He heard the cowboy on the platform yelling faintly, and he tried to call back. But the rushing blackness tore his lips apart and snatched his words from his mouth and hurled them into oblivion. He didn't even hear himself. And then, just as he was wondering how much longer it could go on, he felt the car violently lurch and cant. He knew then the cowboy's shout had been one of warning. The cowboy knew the road. He knew the curve had come—that the car was leaving the tracks and turning over.

From the second of his realization until the world was obliterated, John Iron's mind was a whirling chaos. His ears were filled with a shriek and grind of tortured steel. Then something struck his head, and his hold on the brake wheel was broken. He seemed to soar high, almost lazily through space. . . . Through pitch-black, plushy space that had no meaning and no end.

CHAPTER THREE

War-Camp in the Hills

JOHN IRONS came out of it slowly, knowing that his mind had been blank for a long time. His first thought, as memory returned of his wild flight atop of the runaway caboose, was that he was still down on the railroad grade, and he looked around for sight of the old car and the cowboy. But what he saw brought a grunt of surprise from his bruised lips.

He wasn't down on the grade. He was up in the hills—in what appeared, at first glance, to be a round-up camp. But there was no chuck wagon, and no sign or sound of cattle. He could hear running water and the blurred hum of voices, and that was all.

He was lying on an outspread bedroll in a patch of shade cast by a woven-willow sun-shelter, and the barren conical humps of the hills about him told him he was in the Ten Trees Hills. When he moved, he was surprised to find he felt no pain. His arms and legs all worked, and when he sat up, his head was clear. His hat, gun-belts and the wallet which contained his papers lay together on the ground, just out of reach. Beyond them stood the tow-headed cowboy of the train, smiling.

"Glad to see you comin' round, John Irons," the cowboy said, almost merrily. "Me an' the boys here was startin' to worry. You been out like a light since las' night. . . ."

Sudden John saw "the boys" then, and they were a hardy crew. Their hair was long, their faces weathered and unshaven. All were heavily armed, and they carried their guns as did men who were well accustomed to the extra weight. And around them over the camp were open-mouthed pack panniers containing crated dynamite and ammunition. John Irons knew then why he had heard no cattle.

This was no round-up outfit. It was a guerrilla war-camp!

It struck him strange, belatedly, that the towhead should call him by name. He mentioned the fact, and the towhead indicated his wallet, on the ground beside him.

"It ain't often I go through a man's possibles, without his say-so, John. But one o' my boys recognized you, after we'd packed you up here. I had to make shore. An' I had to find out what you was up to, here on Cobblestone range."

John Irons grunted. "An' now you know?"

The towhead nodded. "Now I know. An' it's a cryin' shame."

"How you figger, cowboy?"

The cowhand laughed. "You know who I am?"

John Irons had an inkling then, but he couldn't quite believe it. He wagged his head. The cowboy watched him, bemused. "I don't believe you do," he said softly, as if to himself. "An' I was hopin' you did. This means the fun is over, for us both. An' it *was* fun, sidin' you in a fight. *I'm* Jim Chilcolte!"

Sudden John had suspected it, after seeing the warlike appearance of that hill camp. But it hadn't seemed possible. He liked this game youngster, intuitively. It was hard to conceive of him as the curly wolf whelp of the Cobblestone range—as the man who had murdered Fronce Ryan.

"Then who," he demanded, hoping his surprise was in some measure concealed, "was that buzzard pack that held up the train?"

The towhead's voice was bitter. "That was Lute Poage an' his Cobblestone Pool Regulators. I'd been out of the country on business, an' they found out somehow I was in that caboose. My boys here got wind they aimed to stop the train an' take me off, but they didn't know where the hold-up would be staged. They didn't find us till they heard the shootin' an' the crash o' the caboose. They picked us both up an' brought us up here."

The towhead smiled suddenly. "Hey, I'm gettin' it now, John Irons. This here's a purty fine joke—on somebody. An' I reckon it's on you. You didn't know me. You thought Poage's pack was my outfit. That's why you took a hand, an' pulled me outa that crack. You kind of got off on the wrong foot, didn't you?"

The outlaw's words suggested he understood completely the nature of John Irons' pilgrimage to the Ten Trees Hills. Sudden John glanced at his wallet again, and the cowboy nodded.

"That's right. I saw your warrant for me, an' your orders. *'Dead or alive,'* Oregon Rob says. That's strong talk, John."

It had been dark in the caboose the night before, and John Irons hadn't gotten a full look at the outlaw then. Likewise, his mind, so far that morning, had been too confused and too busy to take adequate measure of the man. He took that measure now, deliberately, allowing the minutes to pass in silence.

He had no fear of silence, in the camp of the enemy. He was the Law, waiting, certain of himself, inexorable as iron. He had come to the Cobblestone range with the conviction he'd have a bitter fight to take Jim Chilcote. He still expected that fight. But he no longer looked forward to it with his relish of the day before.

The towhead's boyish, slight appearance was, he saw, deceptive. Chilcote was almost as tall as John Irons himself, and clean-cut as a wedge. But it was the eyes that caught and riveted John Irons' attention.

They were the kind of eyes John Irons liked in a friend, and hated to find in an enemy. They were bright and bluish gray, like polished steel in sunlight—frank and open, but harboring potential danger. There was no hostility in them for the man who had come to take him to justice. Nor did John Irons' professional lawman's attitude bother him. The eyes were smiling and friendly and curious, like the eyes of a boy taking in a hero of boyhood dreams.

Had the outlaw abused him and threatened him with immediate death, John Irons would have felt more comfortable. It upset his hard self-assurance to have the man he was taking to the hang-rope treat him with that warm and easy camaraderie. And Jim Chilcote was laughing at him! Laughing because John Irons, summoned by the Cobblestone Pool to help corner him, had begun by snatching him out of the poolers' hands. Laughing

because John Irons, out to capture him, had—himself—been captured!

"This here's complicated, John," the cowboy went on, drawing additional enjoyment from the situation. "You got to kill me, after savin' my life, 'cause I won't never be took alive. I got to kill you—or be killed. But I can't, 'cause I owe you for my life, already. Now what the hell am *I* goin' to do?"

"Maybe it would be easier," John Irons suggested softly, "if you done it to my back. *Like you done Fronce Ryan!*"

Then he saw the blue-gray eyes change. The blue drained out of them completely, the gray went hard and cold as ice. Yet they still contained no threat to him. There was hate—deep-seated vehement hate—the kind that leads to killing. But that hatred seemed general and unfocused. At least, it was not directed toward John Irons.

"So that's the way the wind blows." The outlaw's voice lacked its former vibrance and good will. "Be no good, I reckon, to tell you I didn't kill Ryan?"

John Irons wagged his head. "Not 'less you could tell me that you an' yore pa didn't plot to take over the Cobblestone range for yore Anchor Ox. Not 'less you could tell me you didn't blow Barrel Spring to stop its flow an' split the Pool, then plant that refinery oil to start a stampede an' ruin the ones that had sided you in the Pool fight—so's you could take them over, too!"

*

FOR a minute, Chilcote didn't answer. His gray eyes looked through John Irons as if he hadn't been there. "I can't tell you we *didn't* blow the spring," he said at length, his voice as toneless and gray as his eyes. "But we didn't plant that post-hole full of oil. An' we didn't aim to bust the Pool. We blowed that spring to try an' *save* the Pool. The others wanted to make it a fight—afterwards. We had no chance."

"How would blowin' the spring of saved the Pool?"

Jim Chilcote appeared to reach a decision inside his head. He took a long breath, and his gray eyes focused again on Sudden John. "I'll tell you truth—all of it. Not that you'll believe me. You're too smart. But you're on the level. I know that, an' I want you to hear my side of it, before I have to fight you.

"Why'd we blow that spring? I can see now it was a blunder. But we didn't think so, then. Pa an' me was cleanin' the thing out that mornin' to increase the flow. We dug too deep, I guess. We increased the flow all right. But it wasn't all water. Part of it was oil—thick an' black an' stinkin' as Sam Blazzard's heart!"

"Yeah?" John Irons' voice was incredulous, and Chilcote shouted at the disbelief mirrored in the Association man's eyes.

"That's what happened! I yelled like I was crazy. I thought we'd struck 'er rich. An' I reckon we had. But pa set me down on the grass there, an' told me what happened to a country when oil was found on it. Told me about Cy Iba in Casper, when Cy made the Salt Crick strike.

"Cy was a rancher, an' a good 'un. But his place went to hell when it was overrun by wildcatters, grease-monkeys an' thieves that filled Casper up after the strike.

"Cy didn't mind, at first. He thought he was goin' to get rich quick, with the rest. He let ranchin' go, an' played the oil game. But he couldn't play poker with the big thieves. He lost his shirt to speculators an' shysters, an' then his ranch was gone. Cy died on the grub-line!"

The outlaw's voice was low and vibrant, and the strength of his emotion was mirrored in the flush of his face. "Pa told me it would be the end o' ranchin' here, if word o' the oil got around. He told me the Chilcotes would make their'n aboveboard, with cows an' grass—not rootin' like hawgs in the ground, for muck! He made me promise to say nothin' about the strike, an' I lived up to my word. Then we talked 'er over. We knew there was others in the pool that would want to play the oil, no matter what it done to the cowrange. So we decided to keep it dark. We decided to blow the water hole an' shut the whole thing off.

"That's what we done, John Irons. We rode back to the Anchor Ox an' got dynamite, an' blowed it. We 'spected trouble,

but nothin' like we run into. We couldn't explain *why* we'd done it, you see, an' Sam Blazzard had us read outa the Pool. But some o' the old bunch stood by pa, trustin' him. An' when Blazzard crowded a fight on us, we accepted it.

"I know we been accused o' plantin' oil in that posthole—to start a rush an' ruin the poolers that stood with us—so we could take them over. But that's a lie. Hell, you think we'd of *faked* a' oil-rush, right while we was tryin' to *cover up* a real strike?"

The outlaw's story was convincing, and his appeal to be believed was a disturbing thing. But John Irons was cautious. All evidence was against him. It couldn't all be wrong.

"What," he asked, drawing tighter the net he thought would trap the outlaw, "about the way your Anchor Ox turned on the poolers that sided you, after the fake strike? Didn't you save yoreselves, then take the others over—after they'd gone to hell an' back for you, durin' the Pool war?"

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THE outlaw's face clouded. "We saved ourselves, yes, shore! Who wouldn't? But we didn't sell the others out. We offered 'em a hand, they spit in it! We thought the fake strike was the McCoy, an' we got ready for a stampede. We cut down our herds an' went on tame feed, to get by without the Cobblestone range. We tried to get the others to do the same. But they had the oil bug.

"They let ranchin' go, an' went a-wildcattin'. They all got mortgaged, neck-deep to a tall Injun, to develop their leases. Then the bubble busted, an' the banks owned the boots they wore. The Anchor Ox picked up their leases—from the banks—because we still aimed to see that the Cobblestone stayed cow-country!

"It was hell on them that had sided us—shore it was! It was hell on us, too. But we'd tried to save 'em, an' they wouldn't let us. An' if a man's goin' to start feelin' sorry for all the damn fools in the world, he's got no business tryin' to ranch!"

John Irons was puzzled by the whole picture. "Who b'sides you would of filled that post-hole with oil? Who else would of killed Fronce Ryan?"

The cowboy shrugged. "I can't answer that. But I got my ideas. Yet, if I made law charges without a scrap o' proof, I'd be bad as them that set you onto me for killin' Ryan. The evidence is good enough to satisfy me. I'm actin' on it. An' I'm clearin' my range o' the stinkin' oil holes that kill my grass an' poison my springs!"

John Irons wagged his head. "Yo're a fool, Jimmy. You can't—"

"I know where I stand, John Irons," the other snapped. "I know I'm damned, whichever way it goes now. But I'm certain-shore that I know who killed my dad an' Fronce Ryan, an' why. An' I'm out to make 'em pay. That's all. After that, if I'm still alive, I'll ride down the long trail to where I ain't known. But till the job's done, I'm stickin' to my guns—whether you or the Pinkertons or the whole U. S. Army comes again' me. Wouldn't you do the same?"

John Irons, a critical judge of men, completed his judgment of Jim Chilcote in that moment.

He saw he might as well oppose the wind as try to deter the outlawed and broken-hearted youth from his chosen course. He knew that a man caught in a passion as strong as Chilcote's would not fear anything on earth—not even of the law. And the prospect of a fight to the death with an antagonist in whom he was matched—perhaps even overmatched—brought a familiar old thrill into his blood.

"I'd do the same as yo're doin', Chilcote," he admitted. "An' I reckon you'd do the same as I've got to. You know the law, an' you know my orders. I got to stop this fuss, an' I got to take you in, dead or alive! I aim to do both, Jimmy. An' that, I reckon, brings us down to earth. You got me, like a snake in a forked stick. Question is, what *you* aim to do with *me?*"

"I'm beholded to you," the outlaw replied, "for saving my life. But even if I wasn't, you'd be welcome to stay in this camp or to leave, as an' when you want—long as you didn't try to make good your brag an' take me along. I ain't afraid of you, John Irons. I wouldn't be, in a fight—I don't b'lieve. But we won't fight.

Time you've took time to look into this thing, you'll be on my side o' the fence. I know that. I'm not worried."

Chilcote's voice was level and unexcited. He was confident, sure of himself. His eyes had deepened to friendly blue again, and once more he was smiling. But John Irons did not misinterpret that fact. He knew Jim Chilcote would continue to smile, even when it came to a fight to the death between them. And John Irons respected a smiling fighter.

"If I don't side you, Jim?"

Their eyes met on a dead level, and the quiet gleam in the still friendly blue answered before the outlaw spoke. "Then my lettin' you go now will have squared my debt to you, Sudden John. Then it'll be a fight to the finish—with no holds barred!"

"No holds barred!" John Irons returned the other's smile, knowing it would not be misinterpreted, either. "Not even the strangle holt, Chilcote—on the end of a rope! An' now, if I can have my guns an' purse an' a horse to ride, I'll head for Ten Trees. I'll look into this thing, like you recommend."

The horse was brought, saddled and bridled, at the outlaw's command, and his guns and wallet were returned. John Irons mounted.

"You can leave the horse at Jimson's livery barn," Chilcote told him. "One o' the boys will pick him up, sometime. An' John, to even up for the loan o' the horse an' keep us even on favors, you can run a' errand for me. There's a girl behind the counter at the Warbonnet Cafe. Her name is Nellie, an' she's got eyes like a columbine an' hair like wild flax. Drop in an' tell you seen me, will you? Tell her I'm all right?"

John Irons looked close, to see if he were being hoorawed. He saw the outlaw was in dead earnest—and a little bothered in front of his grinning crew.

John Irons nodded gravely. And, on impulse, he offered the outlaw his hand. Chilcote took it eagerly, and the grip of the sinewy fingers made John Irons realize what a deadly hold that hand could take—on a man's throat as well as his fingers.

So were the rules drawn for the coming fight. No holds would be barred. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun-Boss of Helltown

IT WAS nearing evening when John Irons' borrowed horse climbed the arid flats where Ten Trees, metropolis of the Cobblestone range, shouldered out from the turgid Greenhorn River. And Sudden John's face registered sharp distaste as he squinted at the old cow-town through the bright luminous haze of the afternoon.

Ten Trees, he saw, was puffing up like a poisoned pup. And it was about as attractive. The half-block of cabins and false-fronts he had known had suddenly lengthened into an unsightly serpentine maze a mile long. New brick and clapboard buildings stood starkly above all else, with black smokestacks belching black filth into the air. Monuments, John Irons reflected dourly, to what men called civilization. John Irons spat.

The ten stately cottonwoods—only trees for fifty miles in any direction, and the landmarks for which the hills and the town had been named—were gone now, hacked down for firewood or green lumber for some man's shack. The dwellings on the town's outer fringe were squalid, miserable, and filthy. There were tents and shacks and dugouts where whole families lived underground, like rodents. Dirty, starved-looking children played listlessly in the white dust. And the stench that boiled up from ugly, weather-blistered black storage tanks was appalling.

Down in the heart of town, prosperity was more in evidence. The business buildings—some of them—were imposing and new. Every place had its hitching rail in front, and the longest and strongest were before the bars and honkatonks.

Of the old Ten Trees John Irons had known, everything was gone, except an occasional cabin dwelling or small false-front cowman's shop, shouldered into oblivion by the new town. Ten Trees was gone. In its place was a boom town—a town John Irons didn't know, sheltering a population he didn't know. A town of wildcatters and riggers and shyster lawyers manipulating laws and leases for their private gain. Sam Blazzard's town!

This, John Irons thought grimly, was

the thing Jim Chilcote was fighting. And he felt another bond of sympathy with the game young outlaw. It was a hopeless fight, he knew. But he'd have given his left arm to have been able to side the cowboy in it.

A hand-lettered sign announced the location of the unimposing Warbonnet Café, reminding John Irons of the errand he had to perform. He had dismounted before the place and was anchoring his horse to the tie rail, when a shadow fell across him, from behind. It was the shadow of a powerful man. And the man held a gun in his hand.

"Leavin', stranger?" a grating voice asked, "or jest comin'?"

John Irons turned slowly to face his inquisitor. The man was of his own approximate height, but was much heavier through the shoulders—a surly, leering hulk of a man with icy colorless eyes and a big Colt pistol in his hand. The gun was trained on John Irons' chest.

"I ain't decided—yet," the Association man replied, entirely frank. "What you think?"

"You're stayin'!" the big man said, emphatically. "You're stayin' a long time! That's a Anchor Ox horse you're ridin'. An' ridin' Anchor Ox horses jest now ain't a healthy pastime. Not in this town!"

The big man flashed a badge as he spoke —a tarnished silver shield showing the words, "Regulator, Cobblestone Pool." And then John Irons recognized his man.

Something had turned over in the back of his head when first he'd heard the voice. Now he had the man pigeonholed. It was the masked man who had led the raid on the Ten Trees accommodation train. Lute Poage, Chilcote had called him.

"I ain't ridin' the horse by choice, friend," John Irons eased. "I was on a train. That train was stopped an' set fire to, an' I was booted off in the middle o' the night. I was headed this way, an' it was a long ways to walk. I was offered this horse to ride. An' I wasn't fussy."

The Regulator's heavy jaw dropped. He looked at John Irons intently, out of his small pig-eyes. Then recognition lighted his face. "So it's *you!* Wal, I'll be go-to-hell! Brother, I was prayin' I'd meet you agin some time. But this here is too much! Say, Sam Blazzard's goin' to be glad to see you! Unbuckle your guns, an' let 'em drop!"

John Irons knew he could have the bully crawling, simply by making his identity known. But his experience with the Regulator on the train, plus the man's present overbearing manner, aroused in him a contrary streak which oft-times before had gotten him in trouble. He preferred to make the Regulator crawl without divulging his name.

"You plumb shore yo're doin' right?" he asked, never winking.

The Regulator nodded, profoundly. "I'm takin' you to Sam Blazzard. *Unbuckle them belts!*"

John Irons gambled that the man wouldn't shoot. He shrugged, faintly. " 'F you want my guns," he said softly—too softly, if the Regulator had but known it— "You got to take 'em."

Lute Poage snarled and did what John Irons figured he'd do. He lunged forward in what he thought would be a surprise maneuver, his pistol barrel upraised to club down the cold-eyed stranger. But the surprise maneuver came from Sudden John.

He was waiting, his eyes measuring. And when the gun muzzle was uplifted, no longer trained upon him, he reacted as if propelled by a suddenly released internal spring. His left arm knocked the descending gun to one side, his right straightened in a drive so blindingly fast that it was doubtful the Regulator knew what hit him. He sat down, blank-eyed, in the dust.

Poage still held his gun, but John Irons kicked it from his hand and shoved into his own belt. Then he grabbed the Regulator by the shirt and pulled him erect. Supporting the dazed man with one hand, he slapped his face sharply with the flat of the other. Awareness came back into the little eyes. But Lute Poage made no effort to strike back.

"Now," John Irons said, his voice as cordial as it would ever be for Lute Poage, "if Blazzard is spoilin' to see me, it ain't right we should keep him waitin'. Turn around slow, an' take me to 'im. But don't try nothing, or I'll knock a grunt outa you as long as a sleigh-track!"

The Regulator turned, snarling, and started across the street, weaving like a drunken sheepherder. John Irons followed, aware then of the crowd that had formed over on the sidewalk. It occurred to him that some of the Regulator's henchmen must be present, and a glance behind confirmed his hunch.

Half a dozen armed men were tagging long. But Lute Poage had reached the opposite side of the dusty street and was entering an ornate clapboard building lettered "Cobblestone Pool, Inc." John Irons followed, gun in hand, ignoring those behind him.

Lute Poage strode straight through a big outer office filled with clerks and secretaries, straight toward an oaken door marked "Samuel H. Blazzard, President."

The desk workers looked up casually from their tasks as the head Regulator stalked through, and the sharp intake of their breath, when they saw John Irons with the gun in Poage's back, was audible throughout the room. But no one spoke and no one interfered.

Poage opened the oak door and passed through it. John Irons followed, closing the door behind him.

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IN THE president's office, John Irons was simultaneously aware of three things. One was a polished mahogany desk, as big as a dancehall, against the far side of the room.

The second was the man behind that desk—a heavy man with iron-gray hair and a weathered outdoorsman's face that looked ludicrous and out of place behind a desk so lavish.

The third was another man—an older man with stooped shoulders, a drooping walrus mustache, and a city marshal's badge on his stringy vest.

Their entrance had, it was plain, interrupted a conference of importance. The red-faced man behind the desk turned white with sudden anger.

"What you mean, bulling in here when I'm busy, without knockin'? By the Lord, I'll—"

The red-faced man saw the discolored hen's egg on his henchman's forehead, and his eyes whipped over to Sudden John, and to the gun in the Association man's hand. His voice gave out, and he sank back in his chair. His anger seemed to give way to amazement and curiosity.

John Irons advanced and laid the gun upon the desk.

The red-faced man's hand jerked toward an open drawer in front of him. John Irons looked at the hand, and it stopped as if it had encountered a red-hot object. For Irons had placed the gun with its muzzle trained carelessly in the man's direction. His fingers had not yet released the grips.

"It was my idee," Sudden John said, almost pleasantly. "Lute didn't have no choice. He said you was eager to see me, though. An' I kind o' wanted to see you. I wanted to tell you to call off yore dawgs, Blazzard. I'm gettin' tired o' them houndin' me. I got job enough here, without havin' to regulate yore Regulators."

Sam Blazzard, oil king of the Cobblestone range, looked puzzled.

Lute Poage bristled, defensively. "He's the long-nosed buzzard that we mixed with, on the train!" the Regulator blurted. "He helped Chilcote to escape. An' he shows up in town now, ridin' a Anchor Ox horse. I jumped him. But I was alone—which I won't be when I go after him agin. An' you kin see the lovin' he give me. If he's anybody you know, Sam, git him outa town. 'Cause I aim to skin him alive, an' wear his hide for gloves!"

Sam Blazzard looked at John Irons intently, appraisingly. There was respect and apprehension in his eyes. "Who are you, man? What game you playin', on my range?"

John Irons fumbled in his wallet and handed over his credentials—including the warrant for Chilcote's arrest, which the outlaw hadn't bothered to remove while the Association man was unconscious. The oil king scanned the papers, looked up to glance quick from Sudden John to the Regulator. Then he burst into a humorless, belly-shaking laugh.

"Lute," he told his henchman, "you better think o' somethin' that'll keep you outa town a week or so. When you find out who you've braced against, your hair's a-going to turn snow white. Lute, I'll make you 'cquainted with Sudden John Irons. John, Lute Poage."

"John Ir—" The big Regulator's voice failed him, and he blinked like a light-blinded owl. "An' I said—said I was goin' to skin him alive!" Lute Poage forced a laugh, but it was plain he saw nothing very funny.

John Irons let him pass it as a joke, however, and the hulking man backed out of the door, with no effort to get back his captured gun. The stoop-shouldered man got up and followed the Regulator, timidly, giving John Irons a wide swing.

Sam Blazzard's fog-horn voice halted him in his tracks. "Don't rabbit, Marshal. You'll want to hear this, too. John, meet Chet Sombers, town marshal. You can say anything in front o' Chet you'd say to me alone. Now, where you got him?"

"Got who?"

"Why, Jim Chilcote." Sam Blazzard wiped the laugh-tears from his eyes with the back of a bear-paw hand. "You'll have to make allowance for Lute. Lute ain't too quick to see things. But you ain't fooled me, any. I can see you used Lute an' his boys to get yourself in solid with Chilcote, so's you could catch him off guard. Well, that's no hide off my back. I'd as leave hand you the reward money as the next 'un. Where is he?"

"Last I seen him," John Irons, distinctly, "he was at his camp, up in the Ten Trees Hills. He lent me a horse, to ride in on."

The oil man stared. "You didn't bring him in?"

John Irons nodded. "That's right. I didn't. I ain't chasin' any reward up here, Blazzard. An' I ain't here to kill yore snakes. I got two jobs here—to end this war an' to find the man that killed Fronce Ryan. An' that's about my limit."

"But you owe us protection, man. We have a life membership in your Association—"

"We're a cowman's outfit," John Irons reminded. "We ain't runnin' competition to Pinkertons. If we'd been called in while this was still a cowman's range fight, we might of took a hand. But we ain't cats-paw for yore oil comp'ny."

The good humor drained out of the oil man's face. "It isn't my funeral, if Oregon Rob wants to renege on a contract. That'll hurt him, not me. But let's understand each other, John Irons. Up here, you either stand with me or again' me. An' you ain't leavin' me much doubt, which."

"I stand for Western Anti," John Irons told him, and a plan was born inside his restless mind. "I stand for bringin' in the man that killed Fronce Ryan an' for endin' the war here. With you or again' you, Blazzard, makes no difference to me. I reckon you'll benefit much as any, though, if I can put the lid on this fuss here. So I got a proposition. I'd like to set down with you an' Chilcote both, an' thrash out a item or two."

The oil man started. "Bring Chilcote in *here?*"

"I'd have to have yore word," John Irons replied, "that you wouldn't try to hold him."

He watched Blazzard carefully as he spoke. But the oil man's eyes were veiled, taking everything in, letting nothing out. "It might be all right," he said. "Good might come of it." But John Irons couldn't be sure what he was thinking.

"Then I got yore word?"

Blazzard nodded. "When do I look for 'im?"

John Irons was purposely vague. "I'll let you know when."

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LEAVING the oil office, Sudden John crossed to where his horse was tied. Turning suddenly, he started back across the street, and met two men he'd seen in Blazzard's outer office.

He knew he was being shadowed, and the knowledge increased his dislike and distrust of the oil king, both of which had been instantaneous and intense. It was evident Blazzard aimed to have him followed, to learn the location of Chilcote's camp. Blazzard had not promised the outlaw amnesty out there.

Changing his plan, Sudden John turned into the Warbonnet Cafe, and took a stool along the counter. Soon the door from the kitchen opened, admitting a host of tantalizing smells, and a girl with eyes like columbines and hair like wild flax.

"I seen a cowboy today, out in the hills," he told the girl, abruptly, when she'd paused to take his order. "He asked me to tell you he was all right."

The girl, beautiful before, was suddenly radiant. And John Irons had another point in favor of the cowboy outlaw. If Chilcote were as bad as he had been painted, he would not be loved by a girl so pretty and nice as this one.

"I got to get in touch with Jim," he told the uncommunicative girl. "An' I can't ride out to him, m'self. Certain folks in this town are expectin' me to do just that, so's they can follow an' spot his camp. Now I rode a' Anchor Ox horse in town today. Jim told me to leave it at Jimson's barn. The horse'll be there t'night, when it's dark. If you know somebody who'd ride that horse to Jim's camp an' give him my message, I would be obliged. An' Jim, I reckon, would be ahead."

The girl was watching him intently. "I know someone who might ride out," she said, guardedly. And John Irons was both cheered and distressed. Jim Chilcote had loyal, intelligent friends.

"Tell—have the party that goes, tell Jim to be in town tomorrow night. Tell him it's important. He's to come alone, an' John Irons will guarantee his safety while he's here. Tell 'im I'll meet him at Jimson's barn."

Leaving the place half an hour later, his envy of Chilcote heightened by the cooking he had eaten, John Irons delivered the horse to the livery barn, as appointed. Then, as evening wore on, he made himself conspicuous about the bars and gaming houses, to divert attention from the barn.

At last, satisfied that the girl with the columbine eyes would be well on her way to the Ten Trees Hills, he went to the railroad ticket office and scribbled a telegram to McDade's assistant in Cheyenne, requesting he check the ownership of Barrel Springs at the Territorial land office.

"Tap this out on yore brass key," he told the freight agent, playing out a hunch born inside Blazzard's office hours before. "It's for Mike Howe, in Cheyenne."

The agent peered at him skeptically through the grill and inched toward the sawed-off shotgun, kept handy for emergencies.

"What," he inquired acidly, "would your cow's name be?"

"Oregon Rob McDade," John Irons replied, to save explanations and to see the agent's eyes grow wide. Then he pulled a fresh new fifty dollar bill from his wallet, tore it exactly in half, and pushed one segment under the iron grilling.

"That wire's important," he remarked. "An' I want the answer, quick as it comes through. I'll be somewhere in town, an' you can look me up. Take this half o' bill now. An' the other'n is yorn when you give me the answer."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ten Trees Gun-Fight

I WAS late the next night when John Irons found Sam Blazzard in the palatial Black Gold Palace, drinking with his wizened city marshal.

Lute Poage was not in sight. John Irons did not like that angle. But Jim Chilcote had complied with his request, and every minute the outlaw was in town his life was in mortal danger. John Irons couldn't keep him waiting. He made for the oil king, and Blazzard turned, seeing him in the mirror.

"Have a drink," the oil man invited.

John Irons declined. Drinking with a man was—in Sudden John's code—a pledge of lasting friendship. And he was not yet ready to make Sam Blazzard such a pledge.

"Maybe later, thanks. Right now, there is a big game in the back room o' the Stockman Bar. I thought you might be inter-ested."

Blazzard's eyes were alert. "Big game, eh? What are stakes?"

"Control o' Cobblestone oil range," John Irons said. "An' the loser hangs for the murder o' Fronce Ryan. Might say the sky's the limit."

Minutes passed in silence with Blazzard's narrowed eyes boring into John Irons' gaze, as if peering into the inside of his mind. Then he seemed to reach a decision. Turning his attention to his drink, he drank his chaser, poured his straight whiskey down on top of it, and never noticed the difference.

"I wouldn't mind buyin' chips in a game like that," he said.

John Irons was certain the marshal had overheard the conversation. And he didn't mean to leave the man behind to inform the Regulators where their chief had gone.

"Better string along, Marshal," he invited. "Sometimes it helps to have the Law handy, in a game where all the chips is blue."

The lawman started to decline. But something in John Irons' eyes changed his mind. He drank his drink and wiped his handlebar mustache on the back of his hand.

"Don't mind if I do string along," he said, agreeably. "An' watch."

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THE Cowman's Bar was small and modest—a relic of the Ten Trees John Irons had known before the coming of the oil. Only the old timers patronized it, and John Irons had no fear that any of the Regulators would be present. Indeed, it was for that reason that Jim Chilcote had selected the place as scene for the coming conference. But there was a chance they would be followed, so he took a devious, roundabout path to the unlighted backdoor. And he knocked before entering.

They found Jim Chilcote seated alone at the table in the center of the small room. He didn't get up when the others entered. He only looked at Sam Blazzard. And John Irons sincerely hoped that no man ever looked at him so.

The Association man bolted the door they had entered, and crossed the room to bolt the door leading into the barroom. Then he looked the room over very carefully.

The only window was unblinded. But it was small, and too high off the ground for anyone to see in from the outside.

"Gentlemen, set," he said, graciously, "an' be soc'able. We might be here a long time. Nobody is leavin', till I know who killed Fronce Ryan. An' why!"

The two men standing accepted the invitation. But they gave no further indication they had heard him. Blazzard and Chilcote were sitting on opposite sides of the table, their eyes locked in icy stare.

Chilcote's hands gripped the edge of the hardwood board, just above the butts of his holstered guns.

Blazzard's right hand was below the table level, near the gun he carried belted in front.

The mustached marshal sat alone at the table's far end. The tips of his right-hand fingers were lost under the left lapel of his clawhammer coat. His eyes were vacant as an Indian's.

"I never thought, Blazzard," Chilcote was saying, "that I'd set this close to you with a gun under my hand, an' not shoot your coyotes' eyes out!"

The oil man stiffened on his chair, and his cold eyes hurled a challenge. "You can try it," he said, "any time you feel lucky."

The showdown in the Cobblestone feud, John Irons could see, was coming—and prematurely. Nor was it to his liking. He had gotten Blazzard and Chilcote together in the hope that he could in that way drag or scare the truth out of one of them. But the situation had gotten out of hand. And dead men, he knew, told no tales.

He was casting about a way of stalling off the crisis when a knock sounded at the door leading into the barroom.

"Telegram," a throaty voice called. "For John Irons!"

"Slide it here under the door," John Irons replied, and under it came. Then Irons slid the second half of the torn bill the way the telegram had come, picked up the wire and read it through.

It was from Oregon Rob, and it read:

> Original filing on Barrel Spring in Chan Chilcote's name. What's wrong with that water hole? Fronce Ryan wired to find out same before he was shot.

Coldly, John Irons lifted his eyes to Sam Blazzard. "You like a chaser with bad news?" he inquired. "Or can you take it straight?"

Blazzard looked at the telegram, and John Irons handed it over. Blazzard handed it back, his face expressionless.

"Bad news is right, John Irons. If it's true."

John Irons shifted his position to where he could watch the oil man and the crooked marshal at once. "It's worse'n

you know, Sam. Yo're under arrest—for murder. You killed Chan Chilcote an' Fronce Ryan, an' you've tried to kill Jim here, too. All because o' what that telegram says!"

Blazzard sneered. "You've lost your mind, hombre—"

John Irons' voice filled the room, cutting him off. It wasn't a pleasant sound. "It's no good, Sam. Yo're done. I know just about everythin', an' what I don't know I can guess. You come up on Barrel Spring that day three months ago while Chan an' Jim Chilcote was gone back to the Anchor Ox for dynamite to blow it with. You seen it flowin' oil, an' you seen the Chilcotes comin' back, so you hid out there-abouts to watch. You seen 'em blow the hole, an' you guessed what they was up to.

"You took the next train for Cheyenne, Blazzard, to file on that spring section yoreself, figgerin' to open up that oil pocket. But you found Chan had beat you to it, by a couple o' days. So you had to run Chan off the range, to get it back. You let it out you'd seen 'em blow the spring, an' you got the Anchor Ox read out o' the pool. When that didn't put Chan out o' business, you planted that refinery oil in the post-hole—not on ground where there *was* oil, but on ground Chan was usin' for range—to stampede his cow pasture an' ruin him.

"Chan knew what you was up to," the Association man went on, the jigsaw segments falling together to complete the pattern as he spoke. "But he couldn't bring the law on you without lettin' the cat out about the real oil, an' he knew what that would do his cow range. So he fought you the only way he could—with a gun. An' he played square into yore hand, 'cause that give you a excuse to kill him an' get him out o' the way, permanent.

"With Chan dead, you was settin' purty, Blazzard. But young Jim was Chan's heir, an' rightful owner o' the spring section. You had to kill Jim, too, before you was all in the clear. You was well on yore way to gettin' that done, too. But you slipped bad when you called Western Anti in to do yore killin'. An' you caught yore neck in a noose!"

The oil man smiled, confidently. "You're purely nuts, John Irons. You're barkin' up the wrong tree. Ain't a court in the land would touch me."

"There's one court that will," John Irons promised. "Blazzard, the only jury you'll see will be the men you've hoodwinked, an' ruined. They'll touch you, once I've told 'em what I know. They'll turn on you like curly wolves. Blazzard, you won't live tomorrow out in this town, once I've spilt!"

"You've spilt now, John Irons!" the oil man snarled, and Sudden John could see he'd jabbed where the oiler was touchy. "You ain't tellin' nothing more around this town. An' Barrel Springs will still be mine, because Jim Chilcote won't be around to claim it. My filin' will stand, John Irons. An' you're going to die—"

"—like Fronce died," John Irons cut in, "when he got onto yore game. That it, Sam?"

The oil king nodded, and smiled, recalling. "Like Fronce died, John, for stickin' his long nose into things that didn't concern him. Don't move, either of you. John Irons, don't even blink your damned cat's eyes. You're covered! Lute Poage is outside that window right now, on a stepladder, an' his carbine's got its ears back. First of you that wiggles his ears will die first, the other one second. . . . Don't nobody crowd now, 'cause you'll all git your turn!"

John Irons heard glass tinkle behind him, and the look on Jim Chilcote's face told him Blazzard wasn't bluffing. He was covered, all right. He swore at himself for a fool, for walking into such a trap.

Then, unexpectedly, guns crashed outside the saloon, and a shout went up—two shouts, in fact. One was a rousing triumphant yell of vengeance, the other a snarling, savage whine of men caught and trapped by certain death. At the same time Lute Poage's bullet-riddled body smashed through the window and fell into the room.

And what happened then broke fast.

★

SAM BLAZZARD came to his feet in a backward leap that upset his chair, and his right hand clawed for the gun in the holster under his Prince

Albert coat. The crooked marshal didn't bother to stand, but snaked the gun from his shoulder carrier, and started shooting from his chair.

John Irons' own guns were out, and he fired rapidly, backing away from the open window. He played the marshal first, because that man's lead was already snarling near his head. He got the lawman's range. Two crimson rosettes flowered as if by magic on the flowered waistcoat. The marshal slumped face-down upon the table. His gun was silent.

John Irons turned his guns quickly at Sam Blazzard. But he didn't shoot. He didn't have to. Jim Chilcote, his eyes blazing with a lethal hate, had beaten Blazzard by a hair to a fair draw. He had almost emptied the cylinder of his gun into the big man's barrel chest. But the oil king of the Cobblestone range was dying as hard as he had lived. His heart must have been shot to shreds, but he wouldn't give in. Not so long as a man he hated as he hated Chilcote still lived.

Sam Blazzard stood on widespread feet, swaying like a mortally wounded buffalo bull that refused to go down. It took both his hands to lift and steady the pistol in his hand. But he lifted it, steadied it, and shot. The bullet went wild, however, and the punctured heart in the big chest seemed to burst under the strain of that final effort. Sam Blazzard teetered forward, following his falling gun to the floor.

The raving clamor of the guns outside ceased as suddenly as did the firing inside the smoke-filled room, and the stark silence was as unnerving as the fury of sound had been.

As John Irons wondered about that shooting outside, a man's anxious voice called through the locked door. "Hey Jim! You all right? You an' that long-barreled, ranniky badger with you?"

"All right enough!" the outlaw shouted back. "You boys keep after 'em out there. Don't stop till there ain't a Regulator left this side o' the Greenhorn. The country'll get by without 'em."

Chilcote caught John Irons' inquiring look, and he explained. "I figgered Sam for a play like this, trappin' us in here from outside. So I rigged up a rannicaboo o' my own. My boys strung along t'night, an' I posted 'em around this bar where they could do the most good—while you was gone for Blazzard."

"An' a damn good job you did!" the Association man admitted.

"But nothin' like the job you pulled," the cowboy said, "runnin' that bluff about pa filin' on Barrel Spring an' ownin' the oil! Sam shore swallowed that! It was rich—"

John Irons nodded. He could see a squall brewing, and he acted to head it off. "Shore he swallered it. An' Jimmy, you better start chewin' on it yore own self. 'Cause it's the fact. I guessed it, when you told me about you an' Chan findin' that oil las' spring. I knew Chan was a cowman b'fore anything else, an' he'd fight to the last ditch to hold his grass. But he had a head for business, too. I knew he wouldn't turn his back on a oil strike, leavin' it for someone else to file on. That would of been askin' for the very thing to happen that did. I sent a wire to Oregon Rob, askin' him to check filin' records in Cheyenne. This here is what I got back."

He gave Chilcote the telegram, saw amazement and stubborn rebellion flare in the blue-gray eyes. "This is one o' your tricks, John Irons!" the cowboy blazed. "Pa wouldn't of dirtied his hands in that stinkin' grease. He told me so! An' if he had owned it, why'n't he come inta the open an' claim it, after the trouble broke?"

"Yore pa didn't *want* to dirty his hands in it—without he had to," John Irons said, choosing his words with care. "But he was smart. Which you ain't. He seen if that oil was ever found, all hell an' hot water couldn't hold the wildcatters off the Cobblestone range. He seen that if that brand o' hell was goin' to be let loose up here, why he'd better be in shape to keep a check rein on it. So he filed on it.

"He didn't say nothing at first, because he wasn't shore that oil in the post-hole was the real McCoy, an' he was still tryin' to cover up that real strike. Then, when Blazzard brought out the big strike, Chan was dead an' couldn't say nothing."

But the cowboy saw a ray of hope. "The filin' won't stand, though. The gov'ment is holdin' back oil an' mineral rights on this ground!"

"*Since* that fake strike was made," John Irons amended. "But Chan filed on Barrel Spring b'fore the gov'ment dreamed

there was oil in this country. Yore rights are good, Jimmy. You own the Cobblestone oil fields. She's all yorn!"

Rebellion flared brighter in the hard blue-gray eyes. "I don't want it, John Irons! I'll never claim it. I won't be another Sam Blazzard 'round here!"

John Irons' temper slipped a notch. "You won't need to be a Sam Blazzard. I'm only tryin' to show you how you can keep Blazzard's kind out o' control here—by takin' over yoreself. You could even bring ranchin' back, maybe, an' help the poolers that deserve help back on their feet—with yore take from the oil. I was thinkin' if you'd do that why, I'd see to it Western Anti would get the law charges again' you smashed. Then you could settle down here with that blue-eyed gal an' do the things yore pa would of done. . . ."

Jim Chilcote was quiet a long time. Then his slow smile broke again. "I never fancied oil-ranchin' much, John," he said. "But it looks like your mind is made up. An' I oughta know better'n to fight you. I'll take over. Your war's over, too. Now I better find Nellie."

* * *

Three days later, John Irons faced Oregon Rob again, back in Western Anti's Cheyenne office. McDade had read newspaper accounts of Sam Blazzard's death, at Jim Chilcote's hands. He had seen where Jim Chilcote was now the oil king of the Cobblestone range. He had seen no word or mention of John Irons.

He had drawn his own conclusions and had marked the Cobblestone case "unclosed." Impatiently, he'd awaited the return of his inspector at large.

And even after he'd heard John Irons' story, Oregon Rob was skeptical. "I never knew you to fall down on a case, John," he growled. "But this time I ain't shore. I'd sorta counted on hangin' Chilcote, an' mebbe you jumped at conclusions—an' missed. I can't hardly b'lieve it was Blazzard behind that powerhouse grab. Not after the fuss he put up to keep Chilcote from takin' over the Cobblestone range. Seems funny that he was plottin' to do the same. . . ."

John Irons yawned. " 'Tain't so funny, Rob, when you look at it. You ever see two houn' dogs chase a rabbit? Didn't you ever notice it's the one fallin' behind that does the yappin'?"

A moment passed in silence, with Oregon Rob looking at his gaunt inspector out of beady, bright eyes. Then he crossed out the words "unclosed" and wrote "closed" to the Cobblestone Case.

"It must of been a dry ride, back," he remarked, civilly. "You use a bit of somethin' to take the edge off the heat? I'll buy!"

THE END

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RAILROAD MAGAZINE

205 East 42nd Street, New York City

★ THE CLEAN-UP

Gopher Flats was the kind of uncurried boom-town where you could get all the wildcat whiskey you could drink, fast-action poker—or your throat cut, for five dollars! But Peace River Bill Tucker, free-lance marshal, balked at paying a dollar a drink—for crick-water!

Rip-Roaring Boom-town Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Necktie Set-up

A BURNING wind whistled from the the east, and the alkali dust lay like great patches of snow on the Wyoming rimrocked flats north of the railroad that mid-August afternoon. At each quick hoof-beat of the bald-faced bay, jets of white spurted from the powder-dry plain, at times obscuring the sight of Gopher Flats, a couple of miles ahead.

Peace City Bill Tucker straightened his lean figure and flicked the shoulders of

★ By TOM ROAN ★

AT GOPHER FLATS ★

It was a cyclone there in the saloon—with a flaming-haired wildcat behind it all!

his long-tailed black coat in a futile attempt to rid himself of the flour-like alkali.

Gopher Flats, he reflected easily, was not much to look at, anyway. Tucker studied from eyes that were as gray and grave as the town itself. It was like the general run of Far-West railroad towns in these roaring-violent mid-70's. Stock-yards, side-tracks, and a few houses and huts took up a mile-long strip of the prairie south of the main line. A couple of worn-out boxcars without wheels made the depot and express office on the north side, with a stilted water-tank at the east end. A seventy-foot-wide streak of wheel-rutted dust marked the street.

Some sign of ambition, however, did show in Gopher Flats in the twenty-odd new-planked stores, saloons and honky-tonks lining the upper side of that so-called street, but the rest was only a lick and a

half-hearted promise of ragged tents, adobe hovels and lop-sided shacks covered with tar-paper or battered sheets of tin, nailed industriously to bridge lumber and cross-ties stolen from the railroad company.

In short, Gopher Flats was simply a new-found hell on the prairie. Its reputation was worse, but its hospitality was not to be questioned. A man could get anything he wanted here—wildcat whiskey, wilder women, cards and dice, his past and future fortune told for five dollars gold—or his throat cut at half the price.

A train from the east finished blotting out the town completely when it was still a mile away from Peace City Bill. Bell ringing, whistle suddenly blowing and the wood sparks burning in the wind from the locomotive's bell-shaped funnel, the train was raising dust as if a great brush-broom had been tied behind the rear platform. As the last coach passed, a stabbing roaring of six-shooters added to the din, and bullets started slapping the ground and kicking up the dust under the bay's feet.

That was Tucker's introduction to Gopher Flats before he even reached its outskirts. The bay went into a frenzy of pitching. Above the noise of the train and the wind, Tucker heard riotous yells of laughter of a crowd of fun-makers, but the dust made it impossible for him to glimpse anything but a blur of faces in the windows as he fought it out with the horse.

Half-drunken dandies and frontier toughs sometimes made the disastrous error of mistaking Mr. Peace City Bill Tucker for a sky-pilot, with his long, sad face and a pious garb. He knew such men for what they were, and he could take a joke with the best of them. There were women in the car, and those rowdies only wanted to show off, but some of the bullets had been too close for comfort. None of them had touched the horse, but one of them had grazed the saddle horn and a second had nipped the rim of the cantle.

Either some fool in the car had been too drunk to shoot straight or some one had been deliberately shooting to kill. The latter speculation was not comforting, and yet there was nothing new about it. Peace City Bill Tucker had been shot at before, —so often in fact, he had forgotten the number of times—here and there by men who were better shots. A man who had ridden saddle express, driven stage, and trouble-gunned in the far places for Wells, Fargo & Company could not help making enemies.

And there would be enemies, old ones and new ones to make, in Gopher Flats. That was the reason why Tucker had decided to make this trip by horseback instead of by stage and train from the lawless mountain town of Jackass Hill, far north of the Union Pacific village of Massacre Buttes.

Taking advantage of the dust, he swung away on an angle that carried him in behind low pines and knolls. The best thing was to come in on the round-about, and edge himself in as just another man among the crowd.

But a couple of surprises were yet in store for him. The first one was the lay of the land itself. Emerging from between two rimrocked knolls topped with jack-pines, he saw a deep gorge in front of him, an abrupt slash in the earth filled with the leavings of scrub timber and taller cottonwood. In the bottom of the gorge ran a rousing little creek, blue, crystal-clear and white-whipped by turns as it wound its way over rocks in its bed or pooled and lay level in spots.

Smoke arose from a pump-house on a high shoulder of the gorge wall almost straight below him. That pump-house, he knew, would belong to the railroad company to furnish water for the tank at the end of the depot, but it did occur to him that it meant one of the worst gouging thorns in the ribs of more than two-thirds of the already hard-pressed population of Gopher Flats.

An old buffalo trail led him to the creek. He struck it at a bend four hundred yards below the pump-house where a rutted trail wound along the bank. The horse plunged into the water to drink, and Tucker slid quickly out of his saddle to drink beside the horse. A cloud of buffalo flies and black gnats came at once. They settled over man and horse, and soon had the thirsty bay switching his tail and stamping his feet violently.

Tucker arose, quicker than he had dropped down to drink. Neither man nor horse had half enough water when he

swung back to his saddle with his hands, neck and face stinging from hundreds of tiny bites. Whipping the air around him with his handkerchief to ward off the pests, he rode on, the bay snorting and lunging.

The second surprise was ahead a short time later. A huge old Conestoga freighter stood under a tall lightning-split cottonwood where a fork in the trail cut across the creek. The wagon was filled with water barrels. Six yokes of stalwart oxen were raggedly thrown out of their places ahead of it, twelve angered brutes fighting flies and gnats, and ready to break into a stampede at any moment.

It was no surprise to see a wagon loaded with water barrels almost anywhere in the West. The surprise came from the positions of a bent little old man and what looked no more than a youth of sixteen. They stood on a plank thrown across the heads of the barrels in the rear end of the wagon. Their hands were lashed behind their backs. Big black handkerchiefs were tied around their heads to keep the gags in their mouths, and from each one's neck waggled a length of strong rope reaching to a big limb of the tree overhead.

All those half-mad oxen had to do was to move the wagon no more than a yard, and man and youth would have died there of slow strangulation.

*

HE CAME up as rapidly as it was safe enough to keep the oxen quiet, and stepped carefully from the saddle to the left rear wheel of the wagon. The old man came first. Like the youth, he was dressed in stout boots, homespun jeans trousers, a buckskin shirt and broad, flat-brimmed white hat. Tucker slipped the rope from around his neck, then the youth's. Swinging back to the old man, he cut the gag from his mouth and the stout buckskin thongs from his wrists.

There had been no time for more than a glance at the grease-smudged and gray-bearded face of the old man. The youth's face was smooth and showed fair in spite of the spots of smudge, and as Tucker took the gag away he saw that he was not dealing with a boy, but with a girl of eighteen or twenty. Her hair was like pale honey, her eyes were wide and gray tinged with green, the terror of death still in them. She staggered, and he caught her in the crook of his left arm to keep her from slumping to her knees.

"Who—whoever yuh are," mumbled the man as if in a daze, "yuh shore come in time, good friend. I thought me an' Janey was gone, shore-sartin. The cattle's mighty gentle 'cause I broke 'em like that, but they started to go several times. Lord, Lord!" he rubbed his chafed mouth, then his wrists, "we're saved agin, by Hannah!"

"I—I'll be all right—in a minute." The girl spoke as Tucker helped her up. "I—I just feel a little weak in the knees."

"And no wonder!" Tucker grimaced. "Here, let me help you to the seat."

He swung the girl into his arms, and walked forward on the barrel heads. The barrels had all been filled before the near-tragedy had struck, and as he lowered the girl to the high seat the old man stumblingly followed him. Tucker steadied him as he climbed into the seat before he turned to thrust out a gnarled hand.

"Thank yuh, friend, thank yuh," he stammered. "I'm Dan'l Webb. This is Janey, my dead son's daughter. I hope no trouble comes to yuh for this, 'cause ever' decent man in town's had more'n his share of wrong an' ruin."

"Drive on!" ordered Tucker, fighting flies and gnats again as he swung back to his horse. "This is no place to talk. Let's get where the wind's blowing."

Webb reached for his whip. "Gee-yay, Brandy, Ball!" He swung his long whip out over the cattle, well above every back and his voice a sing-song of commands. "Whoa-come, Ginger, Jake! In thar, Cotton Eye Joe an' yuh, Take It Away!"

The cattle straightened. The old Conestoga moved. As Tucker swung into his saddle he saw a couple of cartridge belts and six-shooters lying on the ground where they had been tossed under the wagon. He swung low in his stirrup, sweeping them up as the bay moved forward.

When they were on high ground, Webb brought the wagon to a halt, giving the oxen a chance to catch breath. Tucker rode on up beside the seat and handed the

girl the loaded gun-belts and six-shooters.

"Must be yours, ma'am." He touched his hat with the tips of his fingers, a give-away of cavalry days and Army scouting. "They were under the wagon back there."

"Yes, they belong to us." A faint, tired smile moved Jane Webb's lips. "The smaller one's mine. The Navy Six belongs to Grandpa. I—I don't know how to thank you for saving our lives. . . ."

"It doesn't matter, Miss Webb," he cut in. "I just happened along, and did the same thing you or your grandfather would have done for me or anybody else. My name's Tucker, ma'am."

"Tucker!" Dan'l Webb's faded blue eyes widened, bearded mouth sagging like a gaping pocket. His right hand dropped to the old Navy the girl had thrust into his lap.

★

THEN, suddenly, his hand relaxed, his face sobering to twist into a smile. "Forgive me, Mr. Tucker." He expelled a quick, long-held breath, a dry chuckle of sound following it. "Yo're a young man, not thirty yet, maybe twenty-eight, I'd say, though yuh act a heap older, an'—an' even appear older at the first look or two. I—I lost myself for a second, thinkin' quick-like of somebody who'd have to be a heap older'n yuh." He was floundering almost hopelessly. "Old fools like me will be old fools. Why—why, names out here don't mean a thing. No, sir,—no, *sir!* Folks change 'em like puttin' on an' takin' off a hat."

"That's true." Tucked laughed, and the girl tried to laugh with him. "Tuckers, I suppose, have been kicking about all over, since Ol' Dan Tucker fell in the fire an' kicked up a chunk.' "

"I know the song, yeah." Webb was able to force a short, real laugh now. "I used to sing it a heap an' play it maybe three or four times a week on my old fiddle."

"And now," nodded the girl, staring down at the big wagon-tongue, "you never sing or play anything, Grandpa."

"Well, no, I reckon not." Webb looked up at the sky. "In Cheyenne, it was, four year ago come this fall. It was my son, yuh see. John Webb, Janey's pappy. Shot down in cold blood, them what brought me the news months after said it was. Why, by God, sir, I'd kill—"

"Wait, Grandpa!" The girl grabbed him quickly by the arm. "This man befriended us, he saved our lives!"

"And," put in Tucker, feeling quick relief sweep over him, "I never heard of John Webb, though I must admit I have been in Cheyenne—"

"There, there, Grandpa!" cried the girl, eyes suddenly shining. "I knew it couldn't be this man from the start."

" 'Course not—'course not!" cackled Webb. "Gosh dang my hide, I'm just an old fool, like I've said. Go off the handle too quick. Forgive me, young man. The man who killed my Johnny was Peace City Bill Tucker, that damned outlaw ever'body hears so much about! Come on." He lifted the long stock of his whip again. "Let's get on with the water. Folks are waitin' for it. An', mister, yuh come an' eat supper tonight with Janey an' me."

"Thank you, but not tonight." Tucker touched his hat as he backed his bay away. "I'll take the horse trail up the slope and quit you here. I have a lot to do in Gopher Flats, but I'll be looking you up or meeting you at some other time. Good-day, and better luck the next time you go down to the creek to haul water."

The girl smiled as the wagon creaked on, the wind whipping up the dust around it. He sat there watching, a cold, dry feeling clutching at his throat, his thoughts whirling.

Something had come over him, a confounded jingle-jangle spell of some kind. He touched his right cheek. That cheek had touched Jane Webb's when he carried her from the rear barrels of the wagon to the seat. Some of the smudge had come off. For a moment he did not recognize the odor of it on his fingers, then he remembered it as a smoky, half-greasy mixture Indians concocted from roots and herbs to smear on their faces to keep mosquitoes and flies away.

Even with that smudge on her face, he knew now that Jane Webb had done something to him no other woman had ever done. Woman trouble, some called it! Yes, one had hit him squarely between the eyes at last, and the one thing that soured

him to the bone was the fact that he had lied to her and her grandfather like a yellow-bellied cur.

Damn it, he had been forced to gun it out and kill a half-drunk pistol-shooting fool by the name of Poker Jack in Cheyenne four years ago. . . . And somebody had said a month or so afterwards that Poker Jack's true name was Webb!

CHAPTER TWO

"Unhitch, Pitch—and Dance!"

HE HEADED up the narrow trail, scowling to himself. He had asked not a single question as to why the old man and the girl had been left there on the bank of the creek to die, and neither one of the pair had volunteered a word about it. But whatever the cause behind it, it showed that Webb and the girl were not to be easily shoved around in this man's town. They were bucking some man or crowd. Apparently, some one had come to the conclusion that death was the only way to get rid of them—and it would have to be a horrible example to impress others who might take the notion of getting out of hand.

Politics out here followed the true pattern set by the first word of history's beginning. They were rotten. The smoothest liar, the biggest stuffed shirt with the loudest bellow as to the rights of man, and the slickest all-around thief could always make himself the bull of the herd. A few ruled and lapped the gravy, the rest followed to pay the bills. If anybody kicked there was the "law of the land" to fall back upon, to throw the kickers in jail, half the time with a cracked skull, or settle the score once and for all with legalized rope or gunsmoke.

Tucker had a notion that he would soon be hearing a lot about the local lights of Gopher Flats. But just now he was watching the steep, winding trail. Once a scout, always a scout—in red man's territory or white. He studied the brush and low trees, feeling certain that those who had attempted the murder would leave somebody nearby to watch and see that the victims did die.

He did not have too long to ride before he saw that he had guessed the truth. Rounding a bend in the trail and coming over a short, steeper rise, he saw two men ahead of him. One was a tall, gander-necked old man with a straggly gray beard and garbed in battered brown buckskin. The other was short and stout, a button-nosed, bandy-legged fellow of forty, who bore the general marking of a Texas trail-herd cowboy. Both were armed with a long Colt at either hip. The tall one was just lowering a brown bottle and passing it to the short one.

"Howdy, Parson." The tall man spoke first, instantly putting Tucker on his guard for the thinly veiled questioning to come. "Reckon yuh figure it ain't showin' good raisin' fer a fella to be caught dram-drinkin' by a man of yore sort? Sinful, of course? Hurtful to soul an' body alike?" The dark eyes in the old head were keen with coming mischief and watching Tucker's face. "That's what yuh would say, I reckon, *Parson?*"

"You seem to be passing judgment on yourself, old-timer." The bay had halted, and Tucker's lean figure had slumped carelessly forward, the corners of his eyes busy, and his crossed forearms coming to a rest on the broad horn of his saddle. It looked like a listless slump, and he wanted it that way. "Who told you I'm a parson?"

"Yuh are, ain'tcha?" The younger man spoke up quickly, the slight, eager leer on his round face a poor imitation of a smile. "I sez to Kiowa Pete, here, sez I, 'Kiowa, I'll bet yuh a quart of Red-Eye rye to a bottle of beer that that's one of them come-a-weepin'-to-thuh-Lord fellas.' I said it the minute I saw yuh comin' down the crick on your hoss."

"Then," Tucker nodded, face as expressionless as a plank on a corral fence, "you must have seen what I ran into down there—Dan'l Webb and the girl with ropes around their necks? Not a very nice way to find people, was it?"

"That all depends, Parson." Kiowa Pete answered him, his face twisting into the look of some lean, half-starved wolf's. "In these parts it's all accordin' to who put 'em there."

"Or who ordered it?"

"Or who ordered it!" snapped the short man. "Yuh seem to be a rooster who can catch on to things fast. I'm Pan-

handle Sam. What's yore name an' where're yuh from?"

"Where I come from," Tucker's forearms were still on his saddle horn, "men are sometimes damned particular about being asked that question. If you're not blocking this trail for trouble, then I'll ride on about my own business."

"So it *ain't* a parson!" A wide, all-evil grin spread across Panhandle Sam's face. "No, sir, Kiowa, by Gawd, it ain't. It talks back. It says a cuss word an' axes for trouble. Get down, fella! We like to see yore kind dance. We—"

The man's voice came to a halt so suddenly it might have been cut short by a bullet. He stood there, hands on the black butts, the color draining out of his face, leaving his lips sickly white strips. He turned his head, mouth opening with awe, and looked at Kiowa Pete.

The lean one was staring, hands slowly lifting shoulder-high. His eyes were wide, hairy old mouth puckered as if getting ready to let go a one-sided whistle.

"Go ahead!" ordered Tucker. "You were on the verge of saying something about seeing my kind dance."

TUCKER'S left forearm was still on the saddle horn, just as it had been at the beginning. There had been no indication of haste, no sudden gasp for breath, the squeak of leather or the violent twist of the body that usually came when a long-seasoned gun-fighter was making his draw. Yet, in each hand, cocked and ready without a sound, appeared a long Colt with the full glare of the westward sun flashing up and down the shining black barrels.

"S-steady it, fella. Steady it." Kiowa Pete's voice was a tense whisper. "Don't start droppin' them hammers. Panhandle—Panhandle, now, ain't right bright. No, sir, an' that's a fact. He—he shoots off at the mouth when he ain't meanin' no harm. Just—just kinda likes to have a little fun with strangers. Wouldn't hurt a thing if he could he'p it."

"But he does like dancing." Tucker's voice was low, matter-of-fact. "Unbuckle your gunbelts and let them drop. Better still, give them to me. Sky-pilot or not, I'm an accommodating man."

"Better—better do as he says, Panhandle," advised Kiowa Pete as the speechless Texan stood there, like an awe-stricken fool paralyzed in the middle of making a funny face. "I'm a mighty hard man to fool on some things, an' I'll be damned 'f he don't look to me like a fella who—who means what he says."

"I meant both of you, Kiowa. Unhitch—and pitch."

The belts came, one after the other, pitched carefully to land at his horse's feet. He holstered the six-shooter in his right hand, swung down, eyes never leaving their faces, and swept the belts up to hang them around his saddle horn.

A surprise of their lives must have come to that pair of gun-bullies a moment later. Tucker slid his right hand down to one of the belts, filling it with cartridges hastily flicked from the shell loops by nimble fingers. The hand came up, quickly shuffling cartridges into the six-shooter in his left hand.

Panhandle Sam almost made the mistake of starting to lower his hands. "Why—why, damn it all, that gun wasn't *loaded,* Kiowa!"

Ner—ner the other'n!" croaked the older ruffian. "Well, this is damn hackin', ain't it? Keep yore shirt on, fool! That six is loaded to the eyeballs now."

"Used up my last shells at sundown yesterday," Tucker did not pay them the courtesy of even grinning at them. "Shot a couple of sage hens, one for supper, one for breakfast this morning. I'd run into a band of Indian horsethieves earlier in the day. They had the best of it at the end, but they didn't know it. I was down to two shells when they turned tail to the fight."

They stared in that same awed silence as he filled the cartridge loops of his belt.

"I admire that fine cross-draw yuh made," Kiowa Pete said. "Never saw it before, an' I'd reckoned I'd seen 'em all. Slick, smooth—greased lightnin', I'd say. Proves to me the cross-draw's the fastest of 'em all. It's somethin' to tell about. A man like yuh will find a damn good job an' mighty quick in Gopher Flats—or go to hell mighty fast! There ain't no halfway of doin' things in this man's town, brother."

"Generally, Kiowa, I find my own

jobs." Tucker slid the Colt in his right hand back in its holster, and produced a small harmonica from his coat pocket. "You can pat, and even sing, if you like, for Sam while I blow him a tune. And mind you this, Sam!" His eyes were narrow and wicked for the first time. "I am a frugal man. I never waste bullets by shooting at the ground under a man's feet. That's more sinful than drinking whiskey. If I have to throw lead to get you started I'll trim your ears. Let's go."

"Get at it, fool!" Kiowa Pete gave the dumbstruck Panhandle Sam a swift kick astern when the harmonica started to wail. "He's got the drop an' callin' the tune. That's *Give That Fiddler A Dram* he's blowin'. *Dig in, damn yuh!*"

★

HE LEFT them with the exhausted and sweat-pouring Panhandle Sam sprawling on the ground, cursing and holding his aching feet and firing wild oaths at the lanky old Kiowa Pete by turns. Kiowa Pete had complained only of his hands getting tired and his voice growing hoarse. His eyes were cunningly keen when Tucker rode on, eyes that seemed still a trifle amazed, half-kindled with threats, yet curiously dancing at the same time with something akin to roguish satisfaction. But only murderous hate blazed in those fury-filled orbs of the man on the ground.

The north side of Gopher Flats was now at hand. Giant old freighter wagons down from the Indian country were scattered to the right and left or drawn up in tight circles farther away, as if their captains could not get out of the habit of making their camps here as they always made them in hostile regions.

Tucker rode on, guided by the ringing of a blacksmith's anvil in the distance. Passing through a narrow alleyway between a new-planked two-story saloon and hotel, he came upon the crowded street with its dusty clouds, the surging humanity, horses, dogs and all manner of conveyances. The ringing of the anvil turned him to the right. The bay again spurted into another fast canter as a big watering trough fed by a length of pipe rising from the ground showed ahead.

The trough, one of four to supply water along the street, was about fifty yards away, and the ringing anvil only a few doors beyond it. A rolling fat man with a red beard sat in a high seat that looked like a bootblack's stand between stout four-by-four stilts piked to the west end of the trough.

Across his lap lay a sawed-off shotgun. At his belly hung a six-shooter. Not content with a wide-brimmed straw hat, he had an awning stretched overhead. At his back to protect him from a bullet that might come from behind was a half-circling sheet of boiler iron.

A feathered old Indian in a red blanket was drinking from the trough beside a pinto pony. A big, sandy-bearded man in yellow buckskins was coming up on a tall, quick-stepping black. The Indian started to turn away. The fat man yelled something, and the old buck in the blanket ignored it as he flung up, Indian fashion, from the right side of his pony to the animal's back.

"Stop, damn ye!" The fat man's voice was clear now. "Stop an' pay up, or I'll shoot!"

"That's ol' Owl Claw, Barney!" yelled a man in the watching crowd. "He couldn't hear thunder if it rolled through his ears!"

But it was already too late. The shotgun swung up, both barrels roaring their charges. The Indian buckled backward on his pony, the startled pony flying out from under him, the old buck tumbling down into the dust.

A man could not see anything for the swarming crowd and the dust for almost a minute after that. Tucker's bay pushed on through the mob and rammed his nose into the trough. Tucker leaned over to the bent pipe and drank as the horse drank, then he weaved the bay out to where the air was cleared.

★

IT LOOKED for a few moments as if the fat man would be hauled off his perch and lynched, but a swarm of gunmen came running up to throw themselves around him, six-shooters filling their hands. Tucker rode on and turned into the blacksmith shop.

The blacksmith came stamping in, a powerful, yellow-bearded giant of forty-odd, with his grimy leather apron angrily clutched in his right hand, a light hammer in the other.

"An' to think," he growled, slapping the apron across the anvil and throwing his hammer on the forge, "I used to believe in mankind! Damn it, I used to even try to preach! Howdy, stranger. Oh, I see!" He had taken a closer look at Tucker in the shadows. "You're the fellow who rid right up in the excitement an' watered yourself an' hoss, an' then just come ridin' on. Either you've fighting ing blood in your belly, or you're just a plain damn' fool!"

"I'd like to get the bay's shoes looked over." Tucker came forward and took a seat on a low bench while the blacksmith seated himself on the anvil. "Seems like they charge for water in this town and shoot when they don't get it?"

"You ain't wrong." A great rage still boiled in the giant. He sat there on his perch, one foot on the blackened earth of the floor, the other on the anvil block and great maul of right fist under his chin. "Ten cents for man, fifty for man an' hoss. It's murder. Why, by God, look at that!" He pointed to his slack tub. "It costs a dollar for me to get that thing filled!"

"And the same water in the creek down the slope?"

"Seven or eight hundred yards away, yes," nodded the blacksmith. "Try hauling it for yourself an' runnin' a shop in this town at the same time. You saw that killin' out there. It was only an Indian, an' some say you get a nice little mark down on your credit side in Heaven ever'time you kill an Indian. But I ain't found nothin' like that in the Bible I read."

He nodded toward a big, dusty leather black tome lying on a workbench across the shop to his left. "I've met Indians, I've fought 'em. They killed my wife and child, scalped them on the plains. They don't think our way. Maybe they ain't low-down enough—when you look at Barney McGarvin sellin' water out there, or go up the street or down an' see the others sellin' it!"

"And who," demanded Tucker, eyes narrowing, "is the head hog at the trough of all this business? Somebody told me God made the water and put it on the earth for man to drink."

"The book over there says the same." There was a wicked glint in the blacksmith's golden-brown eyes now as he glanced across the shop. "That, I reckon, was before the new sproutin' of a disease called lawyers came along. But, look here," he glowered at Tucker now, "you mean to tell me you don't know the water hog of this town?"

"I don't or wouldn't have asked."

"Well, I'll be damned!" The blacksmith arose, straightened, big hands on his hips and he turned and glowered at the doorway for a moment before he swung back angrily. "Then that proves that you're a fool! Hell, ever'body from here to the Pecos knows by this time who tells Gopher Flats what to eat, drink or wear—an' has the liver shot out of them that won't conform to the rules. The head water hog of this town is a woman."

"A *woman!*" Tucker was on his feet with a jump. "Man, I can't believe it!"

"Don't call me a liar, brother." The giant reached for his hammer, and for an instant it looked as if he were in a humor to let fly with it. "When I say things like that agin somebody I know what I'm sayin' to be true. I said a woman, an' I didn't mean nobody else!"

"Listen to that!" The sounds of shots came from along the street. "That's one of Cattle Kate Johnson's water-sellers right now havin' trouble with somebody who won't pay up. Sounds like it's comin' from the trough in front of the Missouri Queen. Sit down. It'll end, I reckon, about as soon as it started."

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-War!

A MAN could like this rough-handed, yellow-bearded giant at once. A big, self-sufficient man, not afraid of the devil, yet sensible enough to attend to his own business. As he had guessed, the shots up the street, the noise of running feet, cursing and shouting soon ceased.

"An' now," the yellow-head nodded, "they're haulin' somebody off to be buried, or big-gutted Hans Schmitt an' his gang

of deputy town marshals are draggin' 'im off to the jailhouse. A couple of big herds of cattle from Texas got in yesterday an' today. Some of the cowboys don't know the rules, I reckon."

"What kind of people," ventured Tucker, slapping at a big black fly, "are Dan'l Webb and his granddaughter?"

"Dan'l Webb's a fool," scowled the blacksmith, "an' Janey's just fool enough to try to back 'im up. Dan'l tries to furnish water to people who can't pay Cattle Kate's high prices. He was furnishin' it when Cattle Kate an' her crew laid a pipe line down the street an' made a deal with the railroad company to run the pump an' keep the tank filled free for the trains, if they could have the rest of the water they pumped. The company claims to own the water rights of the creek, but they got tired of tryin' to keep men firin' the boiler an' workin' steam in their own pump-house. Fact is, men with sense enough to run a pump wouldn't take the job. It was too easy to be shot from the slope of the bushes, an' the blame laid on the Indians. What do you know of Dan'l an' Janey? You a friend of them?"

"I met them a little while ago." Tucker briefly outlined the near-tragedy on the bank of the creek, but he did not yet mention his encounter with Panhandle Sam and Kiowa Pete. "And that's all I know about the Webb's—or all they know of me."

"But you saved their necks!" The blacksmith was back on the anvil, elbow on his knee and that massive fist under his chin. "You done the good thing, but it won't be good for you. Others have tried to help that pair an' got shot for their meddlin'. That ain't meanin' a lot of folks in this town won't pat your back for it when they hear about it—if they hear. Dan'l Webb ain't the kind not to keep his mouth shut until he thinks things over."

"You might as well have all of it." Tucker looked up at him with a grin. "I'm afraid it's no longer even a half-way secret. I ran into a couple of plug-uglies who called themselves Kiowa Pete, and—"

"—an' Panhandle Sam!" finished the blacksmith, hastily. "You never see one without the other. How'd you get away from them?"

"Sort of talked them out of it." Tucker shrugged. "Panhandle did the dancing." Tucker grinned from time to time as he told of the meetting, but the backsmith looked only worried. "And then," Tucker shrugged again, "I just rode on."

"You didn't need to do nothin' else." The yellow head shook pityingly. "You just signed your own death warrant an' left it in their hands to execute. It would have been best if you'd just ridden on with Dan'l and Janey, though if Kiowa an' Panhandle saw you cut the ropes they'd be after you, anyhow."

"It's too bad." He straightened, slapping at a fly the smudge from the forge would not drive away. "A fellow like you might be of some help to Dan'l an' the girl. I've been hopin' some decent man would come along an' marry Janey, an' maybe get her an' the old man out of Gopher Flats. They've had a lot of hard luck. Fellow killed Janey's daddy about four years ago over in Cheyenne. Man called Peace City Bill Tucker, they say. But John Webb was a wild fool, at best. Some called 'im Poker Jack. Sorter went to pieces drinkin' an' gamblin' after he landed here."

"I've heard of the fellow who shot him." Tucker was careful now, watching that yellow-bearded face closely, not wanting to make an enemy of this man. "Pretty bad, they say."

"That's the talk of some." The blacksmith shook his head. "But I have a brother in Jackass Hill who runs a black-

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smith shop there like I do here. Name's Joe Bloodsong. I'm Gil Bloodsong, a mite younger'n Joe. Peace City Bill's in that town, though I wouldn't want Dan'l to know. The old fool would go lookin' for 'im an' get killed. Joe swears by Peace City Bill, an' Joe don't go wrong on men. I swear by Joe."

"Thanks!" Tucker was suddenly on his feet again and thrusting out his hand. "Now that I know your name I can tell you that Joe's told me a lot about you. I'm Tucker."

"Well, bust my britches, is that a fact!" Bloodsong slid off the anvil the moment he could master his surprise, and caught his hand in a grip that threatened to crack the bones. "Well—well, I'm doggoned glad to see you, Bill! Joe wrote me you might be headin' this way one of these days. Why, I —Now what the devil's takin' Gopher Flats by the ears again?"

Another fight had started at the watering trough just east of the backsmith shop. This time it was being settled by a wild roaring of shots, the yelling of men, and a fierce beat of hoofs heading across the street.

The dust hid it all for a moment when Tucker and Bloodsong reached the doorway, then they saw a man on a tall black horse wildly plunging across the railroad tracks. He kept turned in his saddle, throwing shots from a pair of six-shooters at a mob of gunmen firing at him from the watering trough.

"I saw him when I came up." Tucker's voice was low in Bloodsong's left ear. "Handsome, sandy-bearded fellow who seemed to want to get to the water just before the Indian was shot."

"Barney's finished this time!" yelped a voice in the dust. "That was one Texas cowboy he didn't hold up with his shotgun an' make pay. One ball through the heart, the other'n square betwix' the eyeballs. It was the slickest an' quickest shootin' I ever— *Oh!*"

"An' that ends his talk," half-whispered the blacksmith as the sound of a six-shooter's smacking blow and the noise of a falling man reached them in the growing cloud of dust. "If you have a happy note in your voice here when one of the gang of hellions gets his due, then you're always in a warp over the head with a shootin'-iron. Let's go back an' sit down. I might get a gun-barrel bent over my head, because ever'body knows I'm goin' to enjoy preachin' Barney McGarvin's funeral."

Tucker hesitated. He wanted to see some of this fighting business going on, and he got a glimpse of the fat bundle pitched into the dust in front of the watering trough that was the blood-smeared body of Barney McGarvin. The man who had been knocked down by the blow of a six-shooter was up to his hands and knees, trying to crawl away.

Others were scattering, panic-stricken. Two men had either been shot or were crowding behind the trough for protection from the hail of bullets coming in a rising fury now from the direction of the railroad tracks.

"Come on!" Bloodsong gave Tucker's arm a jerk. "We don't wanta just stand an' get shot. They're Texans, that bunch on the other side of the track. Rolled in only today with a herd. Let's get these front doors closed while we can."

★

BY WATCHING through the cracks, Tucker could see that more men had come scurrying up from beyond the stock yards south of the tracks. As Gil Bloodsong explained it, they were riders who had pushed through with the two outfits of cattle six weeks ahead of time.

Wholesale robbery had taken place all along the Union Pacific the year before. Cattle buyers had knocked down the price of beef right and left with the claim that most of the herds had been pushed northward too fast and the meat driven off of them on the long trail. These outfits were the first to arrive ahead of time, in order to give their herds a chance to graze and fatten before offering them for sale.

"An' that ain't pleasin' Cattle Kate none too well, they say," growled the blacksmith. "She just about fixes all prices up an' down the line for a hundred miles either way. If some buyer gets out of hand, then a gunman or two goes over an' either gun-herds 'im back or puts 'im in shape for a coffin. Cattle Kate's as big as a horse an' as tough as a sidewinder—an'—an' by God, *here she*

comes like a steamboat 'round the bend!"

Tucker's mouth flew open with surprise. Coming westward along the street was a snow-white Arabian horse, a beast noble enough in his gold and silver saddle and fine trappings, to head the world's greatest circus parade. On his saddle sat an Amazon of twenty-five, glorious in her flaming cloud of red hair and rouge, high-laced red shoes covering her feet and ankles to the calves, the rest flowing silk, plumes and spangles, and a jewel-butted six-shooter at either hip.

One expected the thunder of the drums and the blowing of the fifes when such a turn-out appeared. But Cattle Kate Johnson was riding quietly, head up, blue eyes flashing, great bosom expanded. She ignored the crowd as if it did not exist. Right along between the two lines of fire she was coming, the entire street belonging to her, and the shooting was stabbing down as if unseen hands were suddenly plugging the barrels of every weapon that had gone into action.

Whatever kind of queen Cattle Kate Johnson was trying to be, she was making ing a good stab of it. The roughest hellion that ever blew out of Texas would stop dead-still in a fight and risk getting shot before he would shoot a woman. They stopped, jerking up their guns when their fingers were tightening on the triggers. A few shots came after she had passed between the lines of fire. But she turned, coming back, the plumes on her head swaying and nodding, her face showing no sign that she knew that such a thing as a gun-war in Gopher Flats had ever been started. And then the fight was over, with men looking sheepishly at each other as they holstered their weapons and moved away.

"An' now," nodded Gil Bloodsong, "maybe you know why she can sell water an' get away with it. She's beautiful, in spite of her size. Highups of the railroad company come here swearin' to cut her throat right in her own fine honkytonk. . . . Then, they wind up wantin' to kick loose from their wives. Listen to the fools cheerin' her up the street. . . . Let me get the bar across these doors an' I'll have a look at your bay's shoes, an' then I'm closin' shop. And you'll come with me."

He picked up his shoeing hammer and tightened the nails in the shoes on the bay's forehoofs, then poured a can of water from the slack tub on the smudge in the forge. He slung on his big black parson's hat, then, buckling on a cartridge belt and its heavy Colt, he plopped his huge leather-bound Bible under his arm.

Another man was in the high seat at the end of the watering trough when they came outside. It was a short, square-shouldered dark fellow this time.

"Kate must be slippin'." Bloodsong grinned as they headed up the street. "That's a fellow they call Sugar Smith. The only thing that's apt to get 'im killed is his bad looks. At the first reach for a shootin'-tool—well, Sugar'll only squeal for help an' plop off that chair like a gopher droppin' in his hole. If nothin' happens, the water'll be shut off about darktime."

It was already getting late. Only a blazing flare of the singing sunlight showed above the prairie. Tucker and Bloodsong passed one jam-packed saloon after another for the first twenty rods. Now the saloons were thinning out.

"I board across the tracks, a little ways on," the blacksmith was explaining. "At a widow's called Grandma Wright. It's clean, the grub's good, an' it's one of the few places in town where they screen the windows an' doors with cheese cloth to keep the damned flies an' gnats out. I—"

He did not get to finish. They were just passing one of the last of the drinking dives, and two men suddenly stepped out from behind the corner blocking the way ahead. One of them was Panhandle Sam, and the other was Kiowa Pete. The short man had a six-shooter in his hand, pointing straight at Tucker's belly.

"It's my turn now!" he snarled.

CHAPTER FOUR

First Blood

PANHANDLE SAM had the drop, and he knew it.

He laughed, "I allus get even. Man ain't born to beat me out. No, by Gawd, I get even! Yuh sneaked yore cross-draw, made me dance, wore my feet out! I—"

"You're slobbering on your chin."

Tucker cut in on him with a grin. "I had *your* guns in my hand, remember. Down there on the slope. If you haven't looked down the barrels and took those plugs out, that gun will kill you instead of me!"

"Huh?" Panhandle Sam's eyes widened as if he had been slapped in the face. He glanced down at the long barrel of the Colt, then upward, then down, up.

Tucker was laughing at him. "Yuh—yo're a liar! Yuh—yo're a damliar!"

"Shoot and see—either one of you!"

"Remember—remember," Kiowa Pete's voice was hoarse, full of fear, "he's full of tricks, damn 'im!"

"Sure!" Tucker was pushing them now. It was push or die. "I was warned about the glorious gun-pups of Gopher Flats before I came here. Shoot, Sam, and blow your hands off—maybe your head with it—or drop that gun before I get mad."

He dropped his bay's reins and walked straight forward, grinning from ear to ear. Kiowa Pete already had his hands half-lifted. They came on up, halting shoulder-high. Panhandle Sam just stood there, frozen between fear and hate.

Tucker reached out. His left hand closed on the barrel of Panhandle Sam's weapon and gave it a downward push to one side. The long Colt roared, a bullet smashing in the dust.

A snarl came from the short man when he saw that he had been tricked again. He tried to saw back, but he was lost. A right fist drove to his jaw, slamming in with the force of a pile-driver. He went to his right, smashing into Kiowa Pete, knocking him to one side, and then he was down on one elbow, his own weapon now wrenched from his hand and covering him.

Tucker spoke, one word as flat as a hammer:

"Reach!"

It seemed that Tucker had powerful magnets in his hands when he moved in on the amazed pair to take the rest of their weapons.

"Gentlemen, that was *guts!* I've heard of such things all my life, but I never saw but one man do that trick before. That man was Peace City Bill Tucker!"

The man came forward with a jump, slamming into Tucker's back. Kiowa Pete and Panhandle Sam started to scur- back, as if to break and run. A cold voice stopped them.

They looked up. Another buffalo hunter stood in the doorway, half as old as the Devil, left eye covered with a square patch of black felt—a lean, quarrelsome looking old goat of a man in shaggy gray buckskin as grimy as a starved muskrat just crawling out of a hole.

"I wouldn't run, now," he growled. " 'T'won't do. Bill might have somethin' else to say about yuh. That's Buckskin Charley, beatin' Bill on the back—if the name means anything to yuh."

They came then, one-eyed Snake River Jordon leading the way. It was a rush, Wild George, Dangerous Jude Jones, Mysterious Dave. Yellowstone Jack, Hard Luck Sooner, Whiskey Frank, Reelfoot Riley, Buffalo Bill Brown, and last of all Mournful Hank, hare-lipped and ugly as sin, red head and beard making him look like a horse in a haypile.

★

IT WAS a lot to shame the Devil, as rough and troublesome as any gangs of imps that ever blew out of Hell, itself. Roaring and bellowing with laughter, they fell upon Kiowa Pete and Panhandle Sam like wolves riding down a pair of buffalo calves.

Before a man could blink his eye the two gunmen had been caught up like squealing pigs and ingloriously pitched across a hitchrack, and the fun was underway. Belts and quirts fell, and yells of terror and pain filled the street.

There was no way to stop it. This was Buckskin Charley Grant's crowd, down from the buffalo country with eight big "buffer" wagons loaded with sun and ash-cured hides, and going to take back loads of freight at their leisure while they loafed through the hot months and waited for the fall and winter shooting to open. They were out to have a good time—a hell of a good time!

When buffalo hunters came to town they took their rough-handed fun like men having their last fling. They lived today, died tomorrow, some selling out in the hostile Indian country when caught shooting buffer. Others took the quieter way

when it was all up, by simply biting through a tube of hydrocyanic acid that each man carried swinging on a chain or a cord around his neck.

Nobody paid any attention to the half-muffled pound of racing hoofs and the cloud of dust boiling down the street. That white Arabian was back in the picture again, the brazen wench in the saddle and six gunmen at her horse's heels.

This was more than a proud thing like the notorious Cattle Kate Johnson could stand. She flung up and flung out of the saddle. A white quirt with a jeweled butt flashed, catching the laughing and shouting Buckskin Charley Grant across the back of the head. The lash lapped on around his face, blinding him.

As the quirt struck again, Buckskin Charley wheeled. Before a hand could stop him he was striking out as if in total darkness—and Cattle Kate was down, smashed squarely in the face with a giant maul of a fist and sent sprawling heels over head in all her plumes and silk on the dusty ground.

"Shoot that damned man!" snarled a tall horsemen, dressed like a honkytonk king. "He's dared to hit our little Katie!"

Two six-shooters started forward. Two shots stopped them, the sudden roar of gunfire jarring some sense into the mob. Kiowa Pete and Panhandle Sam were let go, but they only dropped in the dust, whipped already within an inch of their lives and too weak to run.

The white horse lunged, running backward and wheeling, a snorting fool with forefeet slashing out, knocking men and horses right and left. In the boiling clouds of dust and confusion two men were already sliding from their saddles, each caught heart-high by a bullet—dead men before they could hit ground.

Peace City Bill Tucker—with no other way left to save the blinded Buckskin Charley's life—had drawn his first blood in Gopher Flats.

★

"HANG on to Cattle Kate!" was Tucker's first order when the horsemen remaining alive broke and sped back along the street, yelling for help. "Take her guns!"

He did not need to tell Buckskin Charley Grant anything like that. Wiping the blood from his eyes where the lash had cut him to the bone just above his bushy brows, Grant was already in the act of picking up Cattle Kate.

It was power against power for a moment. Cattle Kate was no weakling. Near-senseless at first and babbling incoherently, she offered no resistance to the long strong arms around her and the swinging black beard thrust in her face. She reached up, raking with her hands as if the beard tickled her, and then her hands were tangled in it, and Cattle Kate—all ordinary woman in the sudden terror and humiliation of it—was screaming her head off and kicking and trying to fight like a wildcat caught in her first trap.

"Let me down!" she wailed, both hands still clutched in the beard and sawing it back and forth. "Who are you? I'll have your damned brains shot out for this!"

"*Saw,* muley cow, *saw!*" yelled Grant, struggling with her furiously and looking like a man who had caught hold of a fighting heifer calf and could not let go. "Quit yore clawin' me! *I say quit!*"

Cattle Kate was not the kind to quit. Grant gave her a high boost with his knee, and his big right hand came down with a furious spank that must have jarred her from the end of the spine to the top of her head. She tried to bite him.

He halted there with one foot on the upper step of the doorway and popped her again and again, setting her afire with a medicine Cattle Kate was not used to taking. She was sobbing and hanging to him like a trembling, spoiled brat with all the fight taken out of her when he walked on, big spurs dragging on the earthen floor, and planked her atop of the evil-smelling bar to his right.

"There now—*thar!*" He yelled that in her face. "Pa used to say I was the best milkin' hand in the barn, but some cows are hard to handle an' break. Shut up, before I tie yore tail 'round your feet, an' throw yuh fer brandin'!"

But Cattle Kate was no quitter. She clawed for her six-shooters and found them gone, but her quirt still hung to her wrist. She brought it up with a terrific slash that caught him around the

neck, bringing the blood flying again. And then hell in all its fury took hold of Buckskin Charley Grant. He tore the quirt from her hand and wrist. He flopped her over on her face on the bar, brought her hands up behind her back, and flattened her down with the first blow.

"See that I ain't stopped!" He yelled that to his hard fighting men. "This woman's had enough men killed or shot up in this town. She ain't even a woman in my eyes right now. She's a she-devil. An' here's where yuh get it, yuh purty cow. I'm takin' some of the kick an' switch outa yuh. Start screamin' yore head off again. Squall, damn it, squall!"

It was fury, and nobody could stop it. Tucker came in with his horse behind him and was caught from either side and held there in his tracks. The powerful Gil Bloodsong laid his Bible on the bar and tried to break through the crowd. Men tripped him, sprawling him belly-downward on the floor and piled atop of him. There they held him, laughing like drunken fools, and Buckskin Charley Grant finished his job with the quirt. When he was through Cattle Kate was again clinging to him and sobbing like a baby. Grant shoved her back against the bar and proceeded to give her a piece of his mind.

"When things like yuh show up," he howled, "then I allus wonder what kind of a mammy an' daddy drug yuh into the world. Now yo'll do as I say. I'll treat yuh like a woman if yo'll let me, but yo've been the wench-queen of the town so long, yuh might not know how that'd be. Give 'er a drink of red whiskey, bartender, an' quit yore grinnin'!"

"Whole town's headin' this way now, Buckskin! Snake River Jordon—as sober as a judge now with a fight going on—yelled that warning from the front door where he was watching the street. "Looks like we're shore goin' to have a lot of fun in Gopher Flats yet."

They were coming. Tucker saw them when Grant carried the sobbing woman into a dingy back room and slammed her in a chair. The gang coming along the street grew in numbers at every door. It was a bold crowd when it arrived, led by big-bellied Marshal Hans Schmitt, a low-browed brute of a man mounted on a bald-faced sorrel and riding with a sawed-off shotgun across his lap like the six ruffians mounted behind him.

"Others comin' down the back way!" called out lanky Hard Luck Sooner from the rear doorway of the saloon. "Gents, they shorely must love their little Katie in this-here Gopher Flats!"

But it was only the beginning. Hans Schmitt rode up to the hitchrack and loudly demanded the woman in his thick, broken English, and Snake River Sam Jordon, backed by an array of six-shooters behind him, only laughed at him.

"Ve'll tear the house down!" raged the German. "Ve'll kill you to the last man!"

"Go ahead!" roared Jordan. "Yore breed are damned good at that, an' have been for fifteen hundred years or thereabouts. It'll be a pleasure to kill yuh an' tap some of that hog blood outa yuh."

Schmitt backed his horse away. A work-engine and a string of flatcars were coming along the tracks from the west. Hell's own mob of humanity filled those cars, and as the train pulled in they were piling off, led by a roaring Irishman.

"Come on and start something!" taunted Jordan, ready to fight the world and all that was in it.

Tucker got there in time to try to shut him up, but it was useless. As soon as the crowds piling off the work-train heard the news they were yelling, demanding blood. A shot crashed out of the din, a bullet smashing into the doorway beside Jordon.

A fighting fool gone crazy as hell, Jordon bull-headedly flung Tucker to one side and opened fire on the crowd, sending lead flying right and left, and the war was on.

CHAPTER FIVE

One-Woman Cyclone

"CATTLE KATE's inside that dump! They've kidnaped Cattle Kate! Cattle *Kate's a prisoner inside that saloon!"*

Those yells were wailed to every mob in hearing distance, and the realization that the woman might stop lead was the only thing that kept the saloon from being riddled with bullets at once from behind and front. But the hold-back was only for

a time. Men yelled to Cattle Kate from where they had sought cover, some behind wagons in rear of the saloon, some behind stacks of cross-ties and lumber piled along the railroad tracks. Cattle Kate wailed back from the little rear room. Some one saw her, face at the stout wooden bars over the window, knew then that she was out of the line of fire, and the shots started raking the rest of the lop-sided building.

Tucker hurried his bay into the little room, getting there just in time to see Buckskin Charley Grant threatening to take the quirt to the woman again to keep her quiet. When Cattle Kate ceased her raging the shooting staggered to a halt. Men called her again, but Buckskin Charley was master of the situation now. Men outside were afraid to shoot, and those inside were driving them back, having a one-sided fight of it now.

"But it won't help long," growled Bloodsong, coming up to Tucker. "We're like rabbits in a hole an' the hounds lyin' back waitin' for us to break cover. By keepin' back and behind shelter they can keep this up for a week if they want to."

"Except for the fact Kate's with us," grinned Tucker. "They're going to worry, a lot about that. I'll bet ten dollars to one they'll be trying to strike a bargain with us before another two hours. There'll be a trick tied to the tail of that bargain, but it'll come."

Whiskey Frank took the bet, just for the sake of the odds. Tucker gave him ten dollars two hours later. By midnight he had ceased to bet, and when dawn came not a shot was being fired. There was nothing to shoot at outside, but the fighting mobs of Gopher Flats were out there, holding their places and going to hold them.

Hans Schmitt appeared, walking eastward along the street when nine o'clock came. On his left side to stop lead if it came, walked a girl and an old man, the latter with a devil of a limp and a bloody rag tied around his head.

"An' the innocent pay for our sinnin'," grumbled Bloodsong as he watched through a crack beside Tucker. "As you can see, that's Dan'l Webb an' his Janey. Listen to the mobs howlin' for their blood. The word's been passed an' you can bet on it that they've had somethin' to do with this thing. Don't ask how folks would believe it! A fool is a fool where you find 'im, an' this town's full of 'em."

"I know. Cattle Kate's got a man—"

"Nary a man in a true sense!" cut in the blacksmith. "That's one thing you can't lay at her door. She won't even let a man talk sweet to 'er. She just sways or hires, runnin' out them she don't want, an' makes the others come to heel. Look! Schmitt's pushin' his prisoners straight for the front door!"

"Let him come!" ordered Tucker. "We can use Hans! The rest of you damned fools keep quiet and leave this to us!"

He wheeled, running to his horse and soon returned with the long rope from his saddle. Hans Schmitt had already pushed his prisoners up in front of the door and was bull-bellowing his threats so that the whole town might hear him.

"He says we can't shoot him without Dan'l an' Janey bein' shot!" raged Bloodsong. "An' he's right. That crowd behind 'im are just waitin'. If he goes down —What are you goin' to try to do?"

"Get set to swing open that door," hissed Tucker, long rope in his hand and a big loop ready. "You to the right door, Jordon. You to the left, Gil. Here, you fellows, grab the end. When we start—"

He did not need to finish the rest of it. They seized the rope. A moment later the doors were swung open. Schmitt saw what was coming.

In sudden fear he started to throw himself back, attempting to drag the girl with him. The rope was too quick for him. It went out and down, a bullet smashing into the doorway just above Tucker's head, and the drag-in followed with a rush so that the doors could be jammed closed again.

"Slick!" The blacksmith yelled his approval in the uproar of the laughter, his Bible still forgotten on the bar. "It's shore nice to have you with us, Marshal Schmitt. Hi, Dan'l, Janey! Welcome to our town!"

They started to celebrate, but it was cut short. The bartender was in the rear end of the saloon and had lighted a fire in the little stove in the corner to boil a pot of coffee. The noise of shattering

glass, flying pots and pans and a wild yell suddenly filled the room.

"Stop that damned fool!"

Cattle Kate was on another rampage. Buckskin Charley Grant had been keeping her quiet in that little rear room for the most of the night, but the moment his back was turned she had gone into action.

Slamming out through the light door she had walked to the foot of the bar to demand a drink. The bartender had left the stove to get a clean glass for her, and the she-devil in Cattle Kate had broken loose.

★

IT WAS a one-woman cyclone. Seizing a bottle on the bar, and sweeping a keg of whiskey off the end of it even while a guard stood at the back door, Cattle Kate knocked a man cold beside her with one blow. Another bottle, just missed the guard's head and smashed to bits against the wall.

Cattle Kate was just getting started. Silks swishing, broken plumes flying, she had gone over the bar, seized a bung-starter, and laid the bartender sprawling. Now the bottles were flying, one after the other in a fury so fast one scarcely had time to count them. Cattle Kate's aim was good. Each bottle was smashing into the stove, the whiskey splattering, running down into the sticks of burning wood and taking fire like powder.

"Yuh panther, yuh she-snake!" roared the hare-lipped Mournful Hank, making a wild leap over the bar. "Yuh can't tear up ever' damn thing in the house. Stop it, I tell yuh!"

Cattle Kate stopped Mournful Hank, but not the bottles. She brought a quart of whiskey down on the man's head, flooring him atop of the bartender who was just returning to consciousness behind the ice-box. Then she seized the ten-gallon keg she had knocked off the end of the bar, and sent that smashing and spilling across the top of the stove.

It seemed to take the yelling Buckskin Charley Grant only a second to get there. He leaped to the bar, dodged a bottle hurled at his head, and then leaped, legs spreading like scissors as he came down astride of the raging woman. They went to the floor, the bar wrenching violently, bottles falling and crashing from the shelves.

"Whoa!" yelled Grant. "Whoa, yuh wild mare! Ain't ther but one man in the whole Wyomin' country who can handle yuh?"

Buckskin Charley had the woman in hand but not the fire. The stove was down, a thin cast-iron leg shattered like glass under the weight of the smashing keg.

Pots and pans were still rolling, the flames spreading and mounting, filling the corner and licking across the room to a stack of whiskey barrels in the corner.

The half-wrecked saloon would be an inferno from which no one would escape in a very few moments. Tucker darted to the rear room. He had unsaddled the bay in the hours of waiting. Now he flung the saddle on loosely, and led the horse through the smoke to the front door. Bloodsong and Jordon opened the doors for him. He took the bay's bridle off, hung it on the saddle horn, and gave the horse a slap on the rump that sent him plunging outside and aimlessly galloping down the street.

Cattle Kate and Hans Schmitt were being pressed into service a few moments later. Tucker cut his rope in half while a hole was being knocked in the east wall of the saloon. By the time an opening had been made through boards and planks, Tucker had himself tied close to Schmitt's back, and Buckskin Charley Grant had the now thoroughly scared Cattle Kate lashed in front of him.

There were stacks of lumber in a vacant lot east of the saloon. Tucker remembered them, and he led the way, pushing the whimpering Schmitt ahead of him. Grant followed with the woman, and a roar of oaths went up from the distance. Even Schmitt started wailing that this was a terrible thing. It was all right for the German to go to Dan'l Webb's house to strike the old man over the head with a six-shooter, then arrest him and the girl for disturbing the peace and use them as a shield, but when some one else tried it it became inhuman.

In a close-packed gang the crowd from the saloon followed, smoke swirling around them. Protected by the stacks of

lumber at either side and Schmitt and Cattle Kate in front to stop shooting from that direction, they made it to a side door in the next building, slow enough about it in spite of the needed hurry. A few kicks on the door with Tucker and Grant juggling back and forth with their prisoners gave them all the protection they wanted to get inside, and so far no one had dared to open fire on them.

It was from one place to another after that, while the helpless would-be killers at either side had to keep their distance and out of sight. When they finally came to the two-story hotel and saloon they cleared the way ahead across the alley by shooting the cross-bars out of a window. In the same slow-motion manner they worked their way inside, then up to the roof through a trap-door to make faster time.

Gopher Flats had never had anything like this. Two-story buildings ran all the way to the two-story jail at the end of the street. There were ups and downs when they came to alleys, but before they reached them Tucker heard cheers rising for them from a safe distance, showing that not all the town was eager for them to get the worst of it.

"This is where I belong right here!" screamed Cattle Kate when they came to the roof of the Missouri Queen. "I own this place, and I'm quitting this mob and going downstairs!"

"*Saw,* muley, *saw!*" roared Buckskin Charley, giving her a spank. If yuh don't stop makin' me trouble I'll set yuh afire!"

Prisoners in the jail on the first floor cheered them through the barred windows and directed their shooting when they came to it. The jail was a big square block-house affair, constructed from railroad switch-ties and the strongest building in town. There was another go-down, but the big office and living quarters of the town marshal on the second floor had to be cleared of gunmen.

Tucker and Buckskin Charley—having their human shields—cleared it with but little help from the others. Gunmen went out the upstairs windows as if they were trying to take wings, and others made a rush for it out an east side door.

Here the alley was wider and there was an ungainly hangman's scaffold standing in the middle of the alley where Hans Schmitt and his gang had sent many men to their deaths on the end of a rope. Tucker and Buckskin Charley had to march back and forth until the last one was safely across. Dan'l Webb and his Janey were in that group.

Now the ropes were untied, and the human shields were driven downstairs and locked in the jail while the prisoners there were freed. A wild voice lifted from a rough-boot in the little crowd.

"An' three big yells for Buckskin Charley an' Peace City Bill Tucker! That was what I call gettin' through hell on a shoe-string with Satan all around!"

"I thought it yesterady!" Dan'l Webb was having a fit now and trying to tear open one of the half-dozen gun-lockers on the wall in Schmitt's private office. "He lied, damn 'im! He's the man who killed my Johnny in Cheyenne!"

Gil Bloodsong leaped for him. The blacksmith had thought to grab his Bible when leaving the burning saloon. He swung it up, intending to smash it down on the old man's head, but he halted his blow just in time.

Dan'l Webb had stopped tearing at the gun-locker and was staring at something on the wall. It was the picture of a wanted man, pasted there alongside of nearly a score of others. With Jane Webb coming up beside him Webb put out his hand, touched the picture, stroked it, a man staring, mouth open, eyes widening. In a whisper the girl was reading. The blacksmith peered over their shoulders.

"Musta been a couple of Poker Jacks in this country, Dan'l," he growled. "Peace City Bill only killed one—four years ago. Couldn't have been your John. Accordin' to this thing your John only escaped from the Federal Penitentiary back east about a year ago. Sent up for shootin' an Army pay master in the Choctaw country, was he? Well, your John always was a quick one to—"

He caught himself as the girl turned, looking up at him. His big hand reached forward. Bible now under his arm, he plucked the bulletin from the wall carefully. He folded it just as carefully, and handed it to the girl.

"Schmitt naturally wouldn't do any talkin', Janey," he half whispered. "Won-

der to me he even pasted it on the wall."

A roar of dynamite came from the direction of the west end of the street at that moment. Some of the saner citizens of Gopher Flats were blowing down the burning saloon and forming a bucket-line to keep the fire from spreading.

A GREAT hush settled for a time over Gopher Flats. Professional gunmen, gamblers and their kind stood as if hypnotized. This thing was impossible, and yet it was here. There were at least seventy men in Gopher Flats to handle that little mob in the jail. Most of those men were only aching for the chance, and yet they had to stand back, clinging to their places of shelter like angry water behind a dam.

Given the shelter of their houses and places of business, these fighting men of Gopher Flats could have stood off and whipped five or ten times their number. But the position had become reversed. Men could still get to their fighting places like angry bees swarming to their hives, but the queen bee had been snatched away from them—and to attack would be to attack the queen herself.

Cattle Kate Johnson was more than a queen. She was every man's banker. In her two-ton iron safe in the Missouri Queen rested thousands of dollars in gold. She had been fair to those who took her commands. A man ready to leave Gopher Flats, especially when it was to the best interests of the gang, could always get his money.

These men were willing, almost to the last one, to go to hell for her. But she had made one great mistake. Jealousy, loving her unlimited power and sharing it with no one, she had made herself a general without a staff of officers to carry on where she might sometime have to suddenly leave off in the middle of things.

That time had come. One Peace City Bill Tucker had hit town. Only a couple of men had recognized him in the beginning, but his name was now on every lip. A near-outlaw himself, men said of him, he was one of those devils out of hell who could drop in quietly, and trouble would naturally grow and swell around him.

Alone at first, he had Buckskin Charley Grant and his crowd behind him now. Grant had friends in town among other hellions of the plains. Those men had their friends, and Tucker had been only the spark to the powder to start the damnation spreading like a gigantic prairie fire growing and spreading before a strong wind.

A bombshell exploded at eleven o'clock. Hans Schmitt was marched out of the jail and stood on his own scaffold. Gunfire awoke as if from every window in the jail, upper floor and lower, while Schmitt stood there crying for his life with a rope around his neck. Four watching gunmen who dared to show their faces from behind their hiding places were sprawled backward in the grass. One of them dead, the others sorely wounded and wailing for help.

The hanging of Hans Schmitt was the signal. The push from the jail started. Hans Schmitt had always made it a point to keep his jail filled, and prisoners were now swelling the mob. There were guns galore and ammunition enough for a young army in the private office.

Some hope lifted for the gunmen west of the town when a wild cheering and the crackling noise of rapid gunfire arose from the direction of the railroad tracks. Men there were stepping into it with a fury. Every gunman knew that the railroad track-gangs had refused to take the work-train out of town this morning.

Those men were rough and rowdy, always ready to take part in a fight on Cattle Kate's side. She fed them their slops, her bartenders, her women and gamblers took their money. It looked good for a few moments, and then a wild scattering of yells changed it.

"Yee-hoo! Men from the Brazos an' the Pecos, too!"

Cowboys! Hell, this was not good! Every gunman in hiding turned his head to look at his companion. Those damned Texans were taking a hand in the game—and the word had gone around that another outfit had been sighted.

Kate Johnson would have no pull with those men—not after last year's prairie-rocking cattle-steal that had made every man as mad as hell from the Rio Grande to Fort Worth!

* * *

"That's Tucker!" Panhandle Sam looked at Kiowa Pete, eyes widening in his round face. "They say that's the way he leads through all these fights he lets 'imself in on!"

"Yuh would still like to have 'im dance for yuh, I reckon?"

"I want only one thing!" Panhandle Sam rubbed the barrel of the long, new Colt in his hands. "I just want to meet 'im face to face!"

The pair sprawled flat on their stomachs behind the wreckage of an old freighter wagon in the weeds no more than a dozen yards behind the Missouri Queen.

They had not been treated very well after escaping with their lives from the beating across the hitchrack in front of the saloon. Laughter and rough jokes had followed them. Twice during the night Koiwa Pete had dragged Panhandle Sam out of near gun-fights.

They would never live down that manhandling at the hitchrack unless they did something here that would give them a come-back. Even if they turned and left Gopher Flats right now, the tale would follow them, a ghost of ridicule to blow up in their faces in any town they landed. Gunmen had to keep their reputation. Once they lost it they were through.

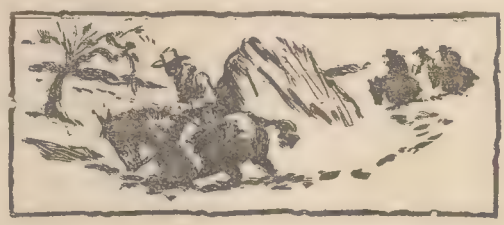
Kiowa Pete was the first to move forward. He was like a long old lizard in the weeds and bushes. Bearing to the right, he led the way, gaining the shelter of the corner of the Missouri Queen. Protected by the overhang of roofs, Kiowa Pete kept leading the way, going west close behind the buildings. A terrific roar from the direction of the Missouri Queen shook the town as they reached the rear door of the Long Horn.

Kiowa Pete jerked to a halt, mouth sagging open. Grim-faced he turned, moving on. Panhandle Sam followed, wide-eyed, wondering. Guns ready, they stepped inside, and started making their way to the roof. . . .

PEACE CITY BILL TUCKER knew that this was no one-sided fight by a long shot. This thing might take all day and the rest of another night to finish. Even then, the fight might go against them.

The telegraph operator in the depot might right now be telegraphing to Cheyenne for help. A trainload of soldiers might show on the horizon at any time, and there were Army officers out here who had been known to take sides with the indomitable Cattle Kate. If that happened the most of this little bunch might be stretching rope before sundown.

Having left Buckskin Charley Grant and a few of his men in charge of the jail, Tucker was spreading his men from



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He's tough, rough-and-ready, and a battler from the word "Go!" He's a squareshooter and a nice, kind hombre when folks treat him on the level. But when hard-riding feudists break the hobbles and hand him dirt—then it's let the biggest devil in hell take the hindmost!

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roof to roof and was close to the Long Horn when the explosion lifted.

He wheeled, looking back to see dust boiling from the roof of the Missouri Queen. Down in front and rear of the building, glass was flying, men and women running, yelling and screaming.

Then Tucker saw Gil Bloodsong. The blacksmith was squatting against the far side of the roof beyond a shattered skylight. He saw smoke sizzle from the man's hands, saw him get up quickly, run to the shattered skylight and hurl his hissing streak downward, then run back to his place of safety. Having found a dozen or more sticks of dynamite in the jail, Gil Bloodsong was proceeding to try to blow the Missouri Queen to bits.

Keeping in a crouch, Tucker started to run toward the man. The roar of a heavy new Colt and a bullet changed his mind. The bullet slapped a hole through his hat, another and another whistling at him as he stumbled and fell sprawling. A quick roll carried him behind a chimney. He came up, guns out, men scattered to his right and left opening fire. He fired twice at a running figure diving for the skylight on the roof of the Long Horn.

"Got 'im, Bill!" snarled somebody to his left. "An' there's the other'n—damn 'im!"

Panhandle Sam was down beside the skylight, other men with Tucker still pouring lead into him. Kiowa Pete had turned to run, shots tearing at him as he reeled along the lip of the roof and suddenly staggered to a halt and went pitching out into space. Another roar of dynamite drowned out the yells.

The work-train's engine was blowing furiously when the next explosive roar shook the town. Gil Bloodsong was throwing dynamite in all directions now. Gunmen were leaving their places of hiding, brazenly taking shelter among the women running toward the train with their belongings in their hands. Swarms of cowboys from south of the tracks were trying to close in. Gunfire from the work-train drove them back, making it impossible for them to return the fire because of the women fleeing aboard the cars.

Bell *clang-clang*-ing, whistle blowing, the train was pulling out a few minutes later, cowboys and plainsmen shooting at the engineer and firemen as they sought to stop it.

"Water! Water!" yelled a voice from the street a short time after that. "Water ever'where—an' *not a dollar a drop*!"

"Where's Cattle Kate?" yelled a half-drunk cowboy. "A rope for Cattle Kate!

Tucker turned, racing for the jail. All Gopher Flats was stirring now. Men and women were coming, shouting, crying, some of them even singing, and ropes were everywhere. When Tucker reached the jail he found a howling mob already around it and hammering with the butts of six-shooters on the door.

There was no way to stop this thing. The door went down, and the men inside did not dare to shoot. In a matter of seconds the mob was pouring back outside, a struggling woman with them that they headed straight for the scaffold and up, a man with his hands bound behind him, a gag in his mouth and a bloody rag around his head trying to follow them.

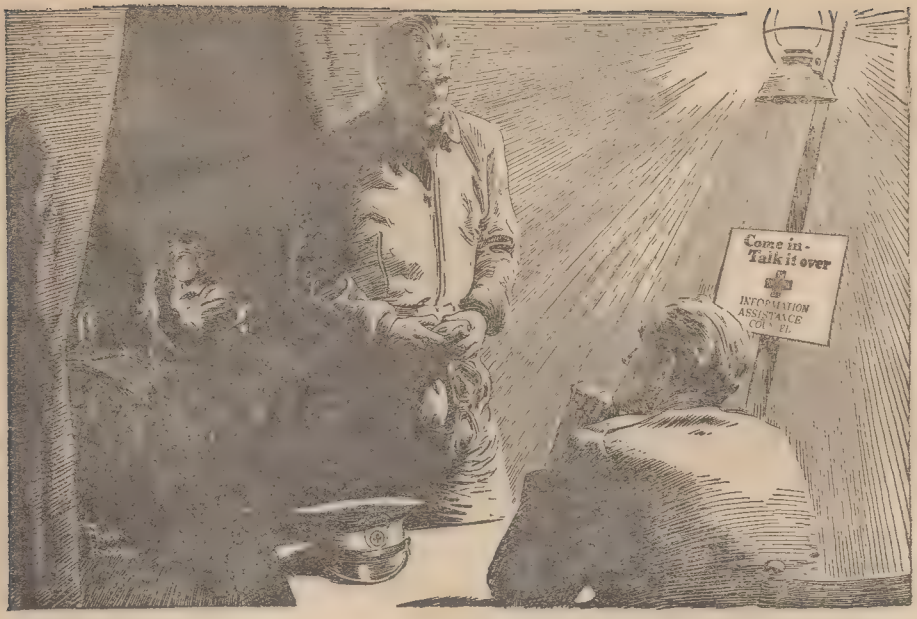
"Wait a minute!" yelled Tucker as he swung upon the scaffold. "Damn it, men, *that's* not Cattle Kate! You fools, you're trying to hang Janey Webb!"

The crowd roared when Tucker snatched away the ragged strip of silk skirt that half-covered the girl's face. "Where's that hair-brained Cattle Kate!"

"Yonder, 'way yonder!" Someone had untied Webb's hands and jerked the gag out of his mouth, and he was pointing eastward where two fleeing riders were turning into vanishing dots in the distance. "That damned Buckskin Charley Grant done it. Poked me an' Janey in a cell. Said—said he'd sorter took a shine to Kate, an' her a shine to him. Said he'd take her up in the Indian Country an' make a woman out of her or kill 'er. Her last talk was for Mr. Tucker to bust open her big safe an' try to get this town back on its feet. . . ."

A roar went up, but Tucker did not know whether it was a roar of anger, cheers or of laughter. For he had flung the rope from Jane Webb's neck, had taken a gag out of her mouth and untied her hands. There on the scaffold he had the girl in his arms, trying his awkward, embarrassed best to comfort her. . . .

THE END



"I'm worried about Ma..."

This boy is a casualty.

A few days ago, he was a hardened fighting man—with a glint in his eye and a set to his mouth that boded ill for his Axis foes.

Tonight he's just a bewildered lad. Bad news from home has hit him—and put him out of action—as effectively as an enemy bullet. Desperately he has tried to solve a problem back home; his mother ill, lonely, helpless—and apparently nothing he can do about it.

Tortured by doubt and uncertainty, he's come to the Red Cross Field Director for help. He'll get it.

It is the job of Red Cross Field Men to unravel human snarls. Across their desks, sometimes no better than battered crates, more than 1,500,000 men in the past year have poured their troubles—have asked for and received counsel and assistance. Daily and nightly, with our armed forces from Africa to India, from Iceland to New Guinea, they are keeping up the morale our fighting men *must* have.

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This space contributed by the Publisher

THE LOOTING OF GRAVELLY GAP

by ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

More gold than those hard-time ranchers and townsmen ever saw would roll in when the big Gravelly Gap dam was finally started. Why, then, should T. Theobald Terry, fighting editor, and Jeff Bones, use their brain, muscle and buckshot to keep that golden flood of prosperity from themselves and their neighbors?

CHAPTER ONE

Vigilante Bait!

OLD Jefferson Bones squinted his faded eyes at the three riders jingling toward the little grove of oaks.

"Trick shot specialists, hell!" he growled. "They're gunmen!"

At his elbow a little man in a corduroy coat reached out for the spigot on the hogshead of beer propped up on a pair of stout saw-horses. A network of wrinkles furrowed the face of T. Theobald Terry, editor of the *Gravelly Gap Gazette,* making him seem older than he was.

He chuckled as he flipped the collar from the glass with a stubby finger. "Jeff, the older you get, the more you pry into corners looking for grief."

A T. Theobald Terry Novel

"That posse's started now. Get in its way, and you'll die, too!"

"Seen that slim duck before," insisted Jeff Bones. "Seen him bein' tried for murder in Nebraska. They almost had the rope around his neck."

"Forget it," Terry advised. "Buckle down and enjoy yourself."

He waved a hand toward the crowd milling around the barbecue fires.

The three riders trotted on toward the crowd. Their saddles were ornate, their garb colorful. They had been rounded up for the occasion, so the story went, from a medicine show which had gone broke south of Gravelly Gap.

A bearded Emerald Valley rancher stepped up beside Terry for his turn at the keg.

"Votin' bonds for that dam was the best move this county ever made," he suggested cheerfully.

"Could be," Terry agreed.

"And this county never elected a better commissioner than Ross Beard. Full of powder and vinegar, Beard is. Folks didn't believe that rock would hold a dam, but he showed 'em different."

Terry's velvety black eyes lifted toward Broken Back Ridge, against the skyline, where the dam that would irrigate and boom all of Emerald Valley was scheduled to go in. Better than $20,000 had been raised locally. Speculative money from the East would complete the financing.

"It ain't built yet," he pointed out.

The rancher swore good-humoredly. "Engineers sank test holes, didn't they? Found solid rock under that rotten shale. This here party's the send-off for the buildin', ain't it?"

"I reckon it is."

Through the mob of townspeople from Gravelly Gap, miners from Broken Back and ranchers from the Valley came a big man in a light-colored coat and a wide-brimmed gray hat.

Ross Beard towered a head above the little editor. His face was perpetually flushed and weather-rough. Gray hairs powdered his black bristling eyebrows.

He clapped Terry on the shoulder and smiled. He was accustomed to overpowering people with his size and genial flow of bluster, but the little editor didn't budge.

There was about Terry a leashed strength, an alertness which suggested fused dynamite.

"I'm looking for some local talent to give those hired hands a run for their money," Beard boomed. "What about Jeff Bones here?"

"Ask him," said Terry

Beard swung his head inquiringly. The old man shrugged. "Got a sprained finger," he announced morosely.

Terry grinned inwardly. When Jefferson used a gun it wasn't for display purposes, but on business.

"What about you?" demanded Beard, returning to Terry. "I understand you've done more than a little gun-handling yourself."

"When I had to," Terry admitted. "But a man don't have to be an expert scratcher to claw at a catamount that's jumped on his back."

Beard grinned. "Suit yourself." Moving away, he called over his shoulder, "Those copies of the special edition ready?"

"Every last one of 'em," Terry told him.

The crowd began to straggle toward the spot selected for the shooting exhibition.

Terry was only half interested. Getting out a special edition of three thousand copies of the *Gazette* had been work, but it meant the first real money break he had had in a dozen years of frontier editing. From here on out, poverty and belt-tightening would be things he could forget. The tide had turned.

Those three thousand copies of the *Gazette,* bought with hard cash, would be broadcast through the Eastern states. Extolling the promise of the dam in a booming territory, they would sell the remainder of the bonds.

Four shots rattling off in a chain interrupted Terry's thinking.

Holding his revolver behind him, the slender trick-shot artist had smashed four glass balls tossed up by one of his comrades. The balls flashed and disintegrated in midair.

Though he was clean-shaven, the jaws and cheeks of the slender man were deep blue. His eyes were close-set, unreadable, watery gray in color. His name, Beard had said, was Eric Selroyd.

He went on to smash five balls, and then six.

Of Selroyd's companions, one was a wide-shouldered man named Lawton who wore a thick brown mustache. His specialty was juggling three sixguns and emptying them into a bull's-eye fifty feet away as he did it.

Terry stood watching it, the black and unlit stump of cigar—which was as much a part of him as his restless hands—rammed like a peg between his teeth.

"Still figure they're wrong?" he asked Jeff Bones.

The old man scowled. His face looked like an old and weathered saddle on which was sprouting a lather of white beard stubble.

"Seen that slim feller before somewhere," he repeated sourly. "Durin' the trial he busted out of jail an' skipped. They'd 'a' strung him up, too!"

Terry grinned. "There's a difference between trick shooting and gun-fighting. You ought to know that."

Jefferson Bones spat with contempt.

"A trick-shot man," Terry pointed out, "has to concentrate on the mechanics of what he's doing. He's fast, but it's a set speed. Hurry him, or give him something else to think about—say a man trying to nail *him*—and it throws him off."

"A feller kin be both," countered old Jefferson. "When you find one, he's worse than either kind alone."

Through the crowd ducked a roughly-dressed man of medium height and middle-age. He wore a straggling gray beard around a mouth with a stubborn cast to it, and he plucked at the sleeve of Terry's coat.

"Mr. Terry, you got a minute or two, so I can talk to you?"

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THE little editor knew him slightly. His name was Frank Potter, and he was one of the independent miners who scoured Broken Back Ridge from year's end to year's end in the hope of turning up the vein of quartz that would make them rich.

"Sure," Terry said. "Shoot."

"Not here. Can we move off somewheres, so nobody'll hear us?"

Terry studied the prospector. "That important?"

"Means livin' or dyin' to some of us," said Potter earnestly. "Me an' Tom Leftwich, anyhow. Look at this." From the pocket of his dilapidated coat he pulled a wrinkled scrap of paper.

On it were lettered the words:

Night-riding don't pay. Clear out of this country or you'll get blown out with lead.

It was signed with the symbol 3-7-77.

"Idaho vigilantes used that sign," Potter said grimly. "Only these ain't vigilantes. I ain't been night-ridin'. Me or Tom neither. But I found it in my cabin up on Two Forks Creek. Me an' Tom'd been gone a couple weeks, an' it was there."

"Any reason for it?" Terry said sharply.

"Only reason I can figger," said Potter, "is that me an' Tom have sunk shafts all around where that dam is supposed to go in. We never found solid rock, no matter how deep we went. Them engineers of Beard's—"

He was interrupted by the roaring voice of Ross Beard who had mounted an upended barrel.

"Keep your eyes peeled, folks! You will now see the trickiest bit of shooting ever successfully attempted. The trigger of Eric Selroyd's gun is set for a one-pound pull. The slightest miscalculation means he will miss!"

"Get Tom Leftwich," said Terry softly. "I want to talk to him too."

Potter nodded and left. Terry's velvety black eyes, smouldering now, began a search for the other miner.

After a moment or two he located the man. Leftwich was standing in the front rank of the crowd which had parted to form a lane. He was a thin, gaunt man, bare-headed, with a drooping yellow mustache.

Selroyd's two companions, the wide-shouldered Lawton and a pudgy, brick-cheeked fellow named Griffith, were pushing back the crowd to make more room.

The brass which studded their holsters, saddle skirts and leather sleeve guards caught the flashing rays of the sun.

Selroyd, meanwhile, was steadying his horse at the far end of the lane. Terry wondered if the gun really had a one-pound pull. If it had, it was about as dangerous as chewing dynamite caps.

Selroyd held the gun in his right hand. His mount was fidgeting, and he reined it short with his left hand.

In a roaring voice Beard continued his build-up. Selroyd would make for his

target, a silver dollar, on the dead run. While still between fifty and seventy-five feet away, he would put three bullets into it.

That was a good trick, Terry reflected, if Selroyd could do it. The slender, blue-jawed specialist still appeared to be having trouble with his horse, a big bay made restless by the crowd. Selroyd handled him a little clumsily, for the bay didn't quiet down.

"Ready?" called the brown-mustached Lawton.

Selroyd nodded. The bay was fighting his bit.

Lawton leaned out of his metal-studded saddle and tossed a silver dollar into the dust.

Under Selroyd's raking spurs the bay leaped at once into a run. Selroyd bent forward along its sleek neck, the revolver with its delicate trigger-pull cocked in his right fist.

Half a dozen leaps the bay took. Every eye in the place was fixed on that shining bit of silver half-buried in the dirt.

A fly or a fluttering neck cloth might have startled Lawton's horse—anything might have. At any rate, the animal took a swinging step away from the crowd into the open.

It was enough to make Selroyd's nervous bay shy away. And that quick jerk was enough to make Selroyd, balanced and concentrating, plummet on past the bay's shoulder.

He landed on his side, and at the instant of impact, the gun with the one-pound trigger pull exploded.

The lane choked up at once. Men jumped for the bay's bridle. Others crowded in toward Selroyd. It was almost a minute before a voice could make itself heard shouting:

"Stand back, here! That shot killed a man!"

T. Theobald Terry swore. He brushed past two ranchers and burrowed into the crowd. Men were cursing and urging the bystanders away from the spot where a man lay twisted in the dust.

A bullet hole had been drilled neatly in his forehead. It was Tom Leftwich, and there was no doubt that he was dead.

Terry scowled at him, and then jerked his head at Jefferson Bones. Back out of earshot, the old man growled, "Accident, hell! That was murder."

"Can't be sure," said Terry grimly. "It was the jar hitting the ground that made his gun go off."

"It went off a split-second before he hit," snapped Jefferson. "I was watchin'."

Terry shook his head. "Wouldn't hold in court. There'd be a couple hundred others to swear it didn't. Where's Potter?"

His roving black eyes failed to locate the miner in the crowd which was already beginning to scatter. The shooting exhibition was to have wound up the celebration, and Selroyd had declared in a husky voice that he had no desire to continue.

"Potter saw what was happenin', an' pulled his freight," Jefferson guessed.

"All right. I'm going after him."

"Suits me."

"You hit back for the Gap," Terry said. "Get a wire off to that Nebraska town and find out if Selroyd is the gent you think he is."

CHAPTER TWO

Night Attack

GRUMBLING, Jefferson Bones started for Gravelly Gap. For a few minutes Terry drifted among the subdued groups which had lingered to discuss the incident.

There was no hint that it was considered other than an accident. There was considerable speculation as to whether or not Selroyd could have accomplished the trick if his mount hadn't shield.

Beard had assumed responsibility for the disposal of Leftwich's body. He commandeered a wagon, got hold of a blanket or two and arranged for the transportation into town.

Terry presently pulled up the cinch of his horse, a stocky little black mare, and started at an inconspicuous walk for Broken Back Ridge. It was late afternoon, and before long the shadows of the peaks were crawling out across the valley.

Terry had only a general idea of the location of the cabin on Two Forks Creek, and he hurried the mare.

His mind kept going grimly back to those three thousand copies of the *Gazette* in which he had tied up every penny of cash and credit that he could get his hands on.

He still couldn't believe that the facts indicated what they seemed to show. He had seen the reports of the engineers who had examined the dam site. He had seen the samples of rock which—unless they were fraudulent—had proved that a solid anchorage could be had beneath the shale. He had done everything but crawl down into the test holes himself.

If this was wrong, it was wrong on a big scale.

Still, cheating of this calibre wasn't new. Counties had been cleaned out before by crooked commissioners. Once the bonds were sold, they were sold. If the commissioner chose to abscond with the money, that didn't remove the obligation of the county. The bonds had to be paid off with taxes and sweat.

Terry swore savagely to himself. Potter should know. He had nothing to gain by lying.

If there was only rotten shale where the dam was supposed to shoulder into the hills, it meant that Ross Beard knew it, and didn't intend to build a dam. Never had intended to. And he was looting the Gravelly Gap country as surely as if he held a pistol in his hand!

With dusk burdening the low-lying hills, Terry pulled in and looked back over the valley. Here and there, lights were winking on. A dam shape crawling far in the distance would be a wagonload of miners on their way back to the Ridge mines.

Terry pressed on until he found where Twin Fork Creek rattled out of the broken cliffs. Or thought he found it. Here the hills were a rugged maze of canyons and angling hogbacks which mounted, ragged tier upon ragged tier, toward the higher peaks.

For an hour the little editor bored on through the darkness, his mount's hoofs ringing hollowly on rock. Jagged stone monuments rose around him, blending with the blackness of the sky which was relieved only by the faint light of stars.

A little more time, and he knew he was lost. Somewhere along the line he had miscalculated a turn and blundered into a blind canyon.

Terry swore, admitting helplessness. There was nothing to do but dismount, loosen the mare's cinch and wait for moonlight.

He did that, rolling the cigar stub to the opposite corner of his mouth, and settled himself to wait. Down through the tortured gullies of Broken Back came the wind with an angry whine.

He was stiff and cold when at last the yellow glow of the moon sifted down into the crevices of the hills.

Another hour, and he had found his missed turn, and was climbing again. He came out at length onto a wide shelf, thickly studded with pines. Off to his left Terry could hear the muted patter of the creek.

Potter's cabin lay somewhere along the back of the shelf which was perhaps a quarter mile wide. Terry's eyes scoured that stretch of blackness. For one flickering instant he saw what appeared to be a pinpoint of light. It was there and gone before he could isolate it.

Terry scowled, but he touched the mare with his heels and rode toward it.

In among the pines, uneasiness took hold of him. Still a hundred yards or so from where he had fancied the light had been, he dismounted, tied the mare, and went head on foot.

Presently the squat shape of the cabin loomed in the moonlight. If there had been illumination within, there was none now, nor any smell of smoke in the air which was drifting down the bleak face of the cliff against which the cabin stood. On either side was a flanking screen of scrawny pines.

Terry moved through them, his corduroy coat rustling a little, the unlit cigar cocked up in his jaws.

He was a fool, he supposed, for being so cautious. Still. . . .

He stopped a score of paces from the little hut. The door and a triangular patch of ground in front of it were hidden in deep shadow. Terry stood quietly for perhaps five minutes, eyes and ears alert.

He picked up a pebble and tossed it against the door.

For long seconds there was absolute quiet except for the memory of the slight

rattling sound as the pebble struck.

Then a voice said casually from the darkness to Terry's right, "That you, Frank?"

There was time for a man to answer—even debate answering—then a sixgun's hoarse thundering split apart the night's stillness.

Terry had never seen five shots slammed out of a gun so fast. The sound was one stuttering roar, and the orange streaks of burning powder were one pulsing blur.

The five slugs plowed into the patch of shadow, raking it from end to end. Terry went down on one knee, the short gun out of his waistband and in his fist.

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OFF to his right a man was stirring. Twigs snapped under a carelessly placed boot. The darkness beneath the pines was so thick Terry could see nothing, but the gunman was apparently moving in toward the cabin.

Straining his eyes, Terry eased back the hammer of his gun. The tiny click, he was certain, could not be heard.

So intent was the little editor on picking up the figure of the trip-hammer shooter that another sound came to him only dimly and the fraction of a second too late. It was the whisper of indrawn breath close to him, and on his left.

There had been two of the ambushers, and this one had interpreted the rattle of the thrown pebble for exactly what it was.

Terry's impulse was to fling up his weapon for protection. He checked that, lunging instead down and toward the unseen shape.

Had he remained where he was, he would have been a dead man. Immediately over his lowered head a revolver blasted twice, the bullets slashing parallel with the level of his back.

The instant following, Terry had catapulted into a pair of stocky legs. The man spilled down on top of him with a grunting curse, and a wildly clawing trigger finger cut loose a third slug.

Terry was small, but he was a knot of iron muscle. A gun barrel whipped down at his head, caroming off his shoulder with a force which all but broke the bone.

He groped desperately for the arm, caught the wrist and twisted at it in a savage attempt to snap it.

Something tore away in his hands. The force of his effort made him go reeling back on his shoulder blades.

Before he could get his balance again, the other man was up and running. Swearing, in a fever of impatience, Terry scrambled on his hands and knees, groping in the blackness for the gun he had lost.

The gunman who had triggered so hastily at the doorway was behind him, his voice lifted in a shout. He got no answer, and his boots too began to make a running sound.

Afraid to strike a match, Terry pawed frantically in the rubble of pine needles and twigs which carpeted the ground.

Abruptly he no longer heard the smashing progress through the undergrowth of the man with whom he had tangled. That noise was replaced by the sudden hammering of a pony's hoofs.

A moment later, the quick-fingered gunman had also got to his horse. By the time Terry's stubby fingers had raked up his weapon, the targets were gone. The hoofbeats faded rapidly toward the brink of the shelf, and then dropped out of hearing altogether.

Grimly Terry tucked the revolver back under his belt. Railing at himself for—at the least—rank carelessness, he stalked toward the cabin, kicked open the door.

The place was empty.

There was indication that its single sparsely-furnished room had been ransacked. The crude bunk with its mattress of boughs had been torn up. The packing box which had held a few cans of food had been ripped from the wall.

Whether or not the disarray represented a hasty opening of hiding places by Frank Potter himself, was impossible to determine.

The little editor went out and back to the scene of the scuffle among the pines. There he risked a match, and the gleam of light reflected on brass made him stoop.

The object which had pulled away in his hands was a leather sleeve guard abundantly studded with polished brass disks.

Terry stared at it and scowled. It was part—or might be—of such an ornate

outfit as Beard's trick-shot specialists had worn.

Tucking it into a side pocket of his corduroy coat, Terry headed back. . . .

It was well past midnight when he reached Gravelly Gap. Jefferson Bones was in the *Gazette* office.

"Get that wire off?" Terry asked.

Old Jefferson nodded indifferently.

"Seen anything of Beard's gunhawks?" Terry asked after a moment.

"Oh, they're gunhawks now?"

"Could be. I aim to find out for sure. Where are they?"

"Over at the Silver Stirrup. Lawton's been here all evenin'. The other two pulled in maybe a half hour ago. Been pushin' their broncs pretty heavy, too."

The old man boosted his lanky length from the chair, reached under the counter strung across the front of the office, and pulled out a shotgun. For close work he preferred the double-barreled dealer of misery, and he was quicker with it than most men with a short gun.

"Right now?" he asked over his shoulder.

Terry hitched at his belt, eased the revolver under it, and nodded.

CHAPTER THREE

Murderer's Bluff

THE street was empty. Striding along on his short legs, Terry let his glance run across to the office which Ross Beard had set up for the sale of the dam bonds. There was a glimmer of light at the windows, but the shades were tightly drawn.

Old Jeff Bones at his elbow, Terry went on to the Silver Stirrup. The saloon was still alive with the rag-tag end of the day's celebrants.

A poker game without much spirit to it was in progress at one of the corner tables. Three or four men were strung out along the bar. Together at a table in the center of the room sat Eric Selroyd and his two companions, the brown-mustached Lawton and the pudgy expert named Griffith.

Jefferson Bones, an old hand at saloon brawls, drifted casually along the front of the smoky room to a corner which gave him uninterrupted coverage of Selroyd's table.

Terry, the cigar jutting in his teeth, walked directly there, hooked a chair with his boot and pulled it around into place. He sat down without an invitation, smiling pleasantly.

"Nice shooting today—all of it," he offered.

Selroyd's blue-shaven face showed no welcome. "Bad luck," he said.

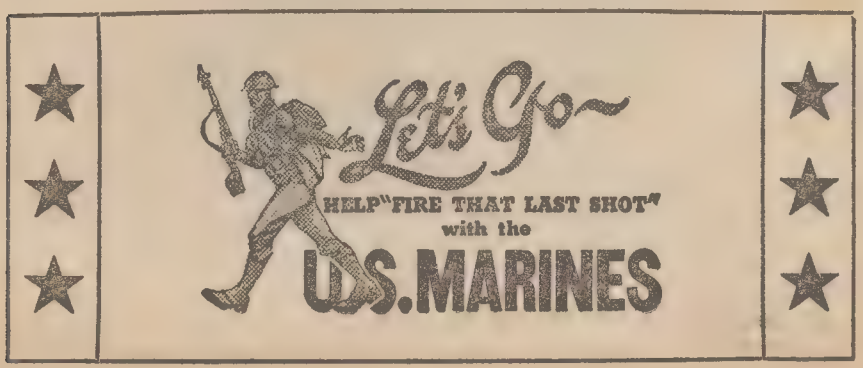
Terry shook his head. "There's no such thing as luck," he objected.

For a moment all three men regarded him steadily. Lawton and Griffith were tired, but they were alert too.

Selroyd said, "What are you driving at?"

Terry shrugged amiably. "Nothin' in particular. Take this for an example, though." From his pocket he drew the studded wrist guard, tossing it on the table.

If he had expected a betraying reaction, he was disappointed. There was nothing he could pin down. Griffith's plump face was burned a brick color. He was a surly man, and his eyes were con-



tinually on the edge of anger. They didn't change much now.

"What about it?" asked Selroyd, his eyes cold.

"It belongs to a murderer," Terry told him. "He attempted murder, anyhow. And when he's caught, he'll claim it was bad luck to have lost this where it could be found. But it wasn't luck. It was foolishness. A murderer with good sense doesn't wear a lot of extra trappings."

"Who is this murderer?"

"Who do *you* think?" said Terry, looking directly at him.

Selroyd lifted his shoulders. He didn't look at his two companions. Griffith's arms had been lying on the table, and Terry hadn't missed the fact that the sleeves of his shirt were creased at the wrist.

Griffith abruptly withdrew his hands into his lap. Lawton, stonily silent, didn't move.

"I wouldn't know," Selroyd said. "Or care."

"All right," said Terry. "Here's something that hits a little closer. Tomorrow the *Gazette* is coming out with an extra. An extra tellin' folks how Tom Leftwich was murdered—and why."

Selroyd's watery gray eyes turned abruptly hard, as if they had frozen. He said, "Oh," in a steady voice, and then: "I don't think you'll print that."

Griffith's brick-colored face had grown darker. He started to push his chair away from the table.

"Stay where you are," Terry told him without taking his eyes from Selroyd. "We'll finish this here. Now."

Griffith stopped, half risen from his chair, his hand poised on its way to gun butt.

He sank back. Terry could hear Lawton's quick breathing. The man was leaning forward, rigid as stone except for the pumping of his chest. Terry guessed that he planned to shoot under the table.

Selroyd tilted back easily in his chair, completely relaxed, smiling for the first time. "One move and your friend with the Greener pumps us full of buckshot. Is that the deal?"

"You get the first move," Terry said, "but he'll be in on it."

Selroyd's gaze swung lazily toward Jefferson Bones and back again. "Not this time. My hunch is your friend can hit what he shoots at. You skip along and get out that extra you were talking about."

He waited, watching Terry scornfully, and under his stare Terry's wrinkled face slowly reddened. The little editor's bluff hadn't been good enough. The special edition of three thousand copies of the *Gazette* had required all the paper Terry could scrape together. He wouldn't be able to get his hands on more for at least a week.

"There'll be a *Gazette* tomorrow," Terry said grimly. "One way or another, there'll be one!"

He started to get up from the table, and as he moved he saw the scorn leave Selroyd's eyes and a look of recklessness come into them.

Terry was hanging there, half up and half down, and he understood that the gunman was going to gamble. He was all that Jeff Bones had claimed he might be—sharp and fast and a killer.

He had been waiting for a slight tipping of the scales in his favor, and now he had it.

But before he could move, or before Terry could correct his disadvantage, hinges squawled on the swinging saloon doors and a man's voice was roaring:

"Terry? Oh, Terry!"

The voice was Ross Beard's, but Terry didn't move until he saw Selroyd shrug, shake his head at Griffith and Lawton, and swing briskly to his feet. Still careful, Terry wheeled around.

There was a bloody bruise on Beard's forehead. His hat was gone and his coat was ripped at the shoulder.

"That damned Potter!" he blurted hoarsely. "Slugged me and cleaned out my office. Took every cent of that $20,000 you folks here had chipped in on the bonds!"

Someone at the bar spun around and roared, "Who?"

"Frank Potter!" repeated Beard with an oath. "Wasn't more'n ten-twelve minutes ago. He slugged me, figured I was dead, and pulled out."

"We'll get him!"

"Which way'd he go?"

THE saloon's occupants had come crowding up from tables and bar, and Beard shrugged irritably. "How would I know? I was out cold, lying on my face. Come along and take a look for yourselves. You too, if you will, Terry. I want this thing checked."

Then Beard looked around at the crowd. "Somebody better locate the deputy sheriff."

"He left for Two Bear Crossing this afternoon," the bartender spoke.

"Then we'll get together a posse on our own hook," said Beard grimly. "Get it started, will you, Eric?"

The blue-jawed gun-master nodded. Beard turned and stalked for the door, the onlookers at his heels.

Terry and Jeff Bones strung along. Silently Terry surveyed the signs pointed out by Beard in his office—the blood on the floor, the heavy desk which was overturned, its locked drawers rifled.

The confusion and the reiterated story angered him, and presently, with a jerk of his head at old Jefferson, he went outside.

On the way to the *Gazette* office the old man said grumpily, "I reckon you'll want to get in on that posse."

"One of us'll have to go. Potter was never in Beard's office. It's a frame."

Inside the newspaper office, Jeff Bones fumbled with a match, got a lamp going. While he was doing that, boots sounded on the walk, and Ross Beard came tramping in through the door.

The bruise on his forehead was still unbandaged. His weather-dark face with its gray and bristling eyebrows had an eager light in it.

"Hard lines," he said briskly, "a deal like this. Backs us into a corner. But we're not licked. Thing to do is go after that Eastern money, and go after it fast."

Terry said, "My hunch is there won't be any Eastern money."

Beard didn't appear to hear him. He had hauled a thick wallet from his pocket, and was counting out greenbacks.

"The sooner we can get those *Gazettes* in the mail, the better. I make the price one thousand five hundred dollars. Here it is. Straight cash. It's a good proposition for both of us."

Terry stood where he was, his back to the new Washington press that was the pride of his life. The stump of unlit cigar was rammed between lips set as stubbornly as if they had been cut out of stone. In his wrinkled face his black eyes were alive and burning.

"There won't be any special edition of the *Gazette,* after all," he said.

Beard stared at him. "They're already printed."

"I know it. I'm going to burn them."

"Son," said Beard, "you'll be burning your way into bankruptcy!"

"I know that too."

For a long time Beard stood looking at him, bear-like shoulders hunched forward.

"Terry," he said. "You haven't got a chance. Start bucking this dam proposition now, and you'll have every man in Gravelly Gap howling for your scalp. This deal is going through my way. You can't stop it, and nobody else can."

"It'll be stopped," said Terry.

Beard laughed. "If you could stop it—which you can't—you and the *Gazette* would be wiped out. You've sunk everything you've got in this edition. Take your fifteen hundred cut, man, and keep your mouth shut! You've never made a dime with your damned little sheet. You'll never get another chance at this kind of money."

Terry's voice shook a little, and there was no blood at all in his wrinkled face. "All right," he said. "The *Gazette* ain't much of a paper. Never has been. But, by God, it ain't crooked. Never will be!"

"Don't be a fool," said Beard slowly. "You've got no proof to go on. You've got nothing."

"I've got Potter."

"Potter's as good as dead right now. Pick up his hand, and you'll get the same brand of grief rammed down your throat. That posse's started now. Get in its way, and you'll go down too!"

Over by the table which held the lamp old Jefferson snorted. "Damn your posse!" He held the shotgun loosely in his lean brown hands. "I'd as leave put a load of buckshot in your hind-end as look at you. Get the hell out of this office, and—"

He was interrupted by two pistol shots which came faintly but unmistakably from the street.

Jeff's head jerked that way. Two more shots came along crisply.

"It looks," said Beard, "as if they'd found Potter. Stand where you are, gentlemen."

His hand had gone inside his coat, but Terry was already moving. Before Beard could get the gun out, the little editor had sprung toward him like a cat. A fist that had the explosive power of dynamite slugged against Beard's jaw, and the big man rocked back and down.

Terry sprang across him, tugging at the revolver in his belt, running for the door. He ripped the panel open, plunged outside.

The street was a black channel with only a bit of yellow light far down it where the Silver Stirrup stood. There was no indication at all that it was occupied until gun-flame tore a slit in the gloom.

The shot had come from the far side of the street, perhaps a hundred yards away. Terry jumped toward it, pounding along the uneven dirt surface of the street.

Jefferson Bones flanked him, legging it along the walk. No fight on record had ever upset the old man, and he wasn't upset now.

"Three of 'em, remember," he growled. "Maybe more."

As he ran, Terry eared back the hammer of his sixgun.

A croaking hail burst out of the night ahead of the little editor: "Terry? You comin', Terry?"

It was Frank Potter's voice, and from the sound of it, he was hit and he was hurt.

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GUNS opened up immediately on the target thus presented, but the prospector had accomplished all he could hope to do—give Terry a hint of his own location and the position of his attackers.

The blasting rattle of gunfire churned between the building walls. The flashes formed a pattern Terry could piece together and read.

Potter had been trapped in the narrow space between Barr's Dry Goods store and a wood yard surrounded by an eight-foot fence. Access to the building gap from the rear was blocked by a shed.

Potter might be down, but if he could still shoot then someone was going to be hurt before they knocked him out of there.

Two attackers were across the street from him, spread out, so there was little or no chance for him to slip out of the pocket.

Terry panted, "Get across, Jeff—into the woodyard!"

He heard the old man's grunting answer, then the nearer ambushing gun had opened up at him. Two of the bullets went wild, for Terry's thudding footfalls weren't much of a target, but the third clipped his corduroy coat at the belt line.

The curt, angry ringing of the guns made a large sound in the narrow street. Terry had not yet shot. He was abreast of the corner of the woodyard, still running blindly in the darkness.

The gateless yawning mouth of the yard was a deeper gash in the black night. There was a break in the walk where the heavy wagons rumbled in and out, and Terry slowed to feel for it.

Out of the yard opening, within ten feet of him, burst the flame of a revolver. The height of it indicated that the man was crouched there—waiting for Potter or creeping up on him.

The suddenness of the shot, although he was not hit, made Terry miss his step. He went plunging down into the wheel ruts, and the gun above him roared again. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Shadowed Gun Trap

TERRY was rolling as he hit in a desperate attempt to get into a firing position. He had one chance in a hundred, and he was snatching at it when he heard the shattering blast of Jefferson Bones' shotgun behind him.

By the sound of it, the old man had pulled both triggers simultaneously.

It was a close range shot. Jeff had been almost on top of the crouching gunman. In the quick flash of light Terry saw his face—it was the brown-mustached Lawton. The whole front of his coat had been torn away by the double charge of buckshot. He died before the burst of flame expired.

The clamor of shooting surged up from

the other side of the street. Old Jefferson was swearing under his breath as he caught a hand under Terry's left armpit. Terry scrambled up. They both jumped for the shelter of the yard. Lead whipped about them, gouging at the fence.

Terry swerved to avoid the looming bulk of a wagon, tripped on the tongue and went sprawling. He was up again, cursing, sprinting for the western end of the yard.

Here, four-foot lengths of wood were stacked head high against the fence. Terry clawed for the top of the pile, found toeholds and boosted himself up.

Beyond him was the black shape of Barr's Dry Goods store. The little editor rolled across the top of the fence, dropped into the narrow building gap.

He landed on his hands and knees, seeing nothing in the darkness. He heard a man's unhappy oath, the rustling of cloth against the earth as someone squirmed around to face him. That would be Potter, ready to repel attack from this new quarter.

"Hold it," Terry snapped under his breath.

"Thank God, it's you!" whispered Potter. "I figgered—"

"Never mind. You hit?"

"Leg knocked out from under me. Couple other bullet rips."

"Bleedin'?"

"Not too bad."

A bullet came from across the street, slashing at the side of Barr's store. Terry boosted the thin frame of the prospector upright.

"Hold on," Potter gasped. "I got a sack here."

They got that and then Terry got his hands under Potter's armpits and heaved him up. He had his teeth ground hard together, for this was the moment when they were vulnerable to a fusillade from the attackers.

Above him Jeff Bones growled, "Got him," and Potter was hauled away out of his grasp. Terry jumped for the top of the fence, caught it and pulled himself up and over.

A second or so too late to catch them, came the ripping volley of slugs from the ambushers who had guessed belatedly what was up.

Terry was lying on his belly on the pile of wood, and he wriggled on over. For a moment the three men waited, crouched in the shielding darkness. Someone was shouting from the street. There were other lifting voices and the pound of boots coming up. The town, shaken out of its sleep by the shooting, was coming alive.

"Kid," said Potter huskily, "you better pull out. I'll figger a way for myself. If you don't, they'll crucify you too."

"Shut up," Terry said, but he knew what Potter meant. The mob now gathering would be hostile. Selroyd's posse would be the guts of it, and Selroyd's posse were killers. If he tried to protect Potter, he would be damned by the lie Beard had spread against the prospector.

He said to Jeff Bones, "The back ain't plugged yet. There's our way."

Supporting Potter between them, they went at a hobbling run to the rear of the yard, knocked the gate loose and went through.

Behind them the mob had swollen. In the street was a din of hoarse shouting. Lead was combing the dark gap where Potter had been trapped, and some of the lead was spilling over to rake the woodyard.

The red light of a torch made a wavering spot in the darkness. More men meant more bravery. Gathering was an overwhelming mob that two or three guns wouldn't stop.

They went stumbling along the alley, heading back in the direction of the *Gazette* office. When they came to the cross street they turned back toward the main part of town. There was the light of more torches now, and the two men were silhouetted as they ran toward the shouting and the gun explosions.

The rising roar indicated that the woodyard was being stormed. A moment or two more, and the mob's hunt for its quarry would spread out.

Torchlight sprayed for a moment against the brick-faced Griffith who was standing in the center of the street, roaring.

Terry swore, and the three men faded along the building fronts toward the *Gazette* office. Directly across from it they stopped, and Terry looked over his shoulder. A knot of men had boiled out

of the woodyard gate. They fanned out over the street at a run.

"We hole up in that office," old Jefferson said, "an' they'll have us cornered. Likely burn us out!"

Terry didn't say anything. In that office was his press. In it was the *Gazette,* the symbol of all he had lived and fought for. He couldn't watch, he knew, while a mob smashed through it.

Potter must have known what he was thinking, for the prospector said in a voice that was faded, "It's me they're after, kid. I'm crippled up, anyhow. If they get me, they'll quit."

"No," Terry said.

"Do it," insisted Potter. "Take them samples. They're in this sack. Use 'em later if you can."

"What samples?"

"That's where I been. Gettin' samples out of them shafts me an' Tom Leftwich drove where Beard claims his dam is goin' in. The shale's rotten, like I said, all the way down."

Terry said, "They'll get all of us or none."

But Jeff was right. The *Gazette* office wouldn't do.

"They're comin'," Jeff said.

★

DOWN the street came the churning front of the mob. Men were running, coming pell-mell, and the torches in their hands made quick, jagged marks against the night. The pudgy Griffith, bare-headed, was in front.

"Easy," Terry said, "and keep quiet." He and Potter and Jeff drifted back into the depths of the open-front blacksmith shop across and down the street a little from the office.

The mob came along as they watched, but the running slowed to a kind of hurried but reluctant walk, so that Griffith was well out in front. He bellowed over his shoulder, but it didn't rush the mob. The closer they got to the *Gazette* office, the less they liked the look of it.

Approaching more closely, individual members straggled and grew cautious. Griffith was drunk, or nearly so. He stopped in front of the door, spraddled out his feet and pumped three shots through the *Gazette's* door.

"Rake it!" he bellowed. "Blast those sons to hell-an'-gone out of there!"

The rest of the crowd came up gingerly. Someone said aloud, "That old fool is plain dynamite with a scattergun!"

"You sure this is where they came?" a voice inquired.

"Where else would they go? Potter was hit too bad to ride. Come along, some of you. We'll bust this door in."

Someone on the outskirts said, "You bust it in an' we'll see what happens."

"Get a pole, then," snarled Griffith. "We'll do it that way."

Several men scrambled off. Terry watched the rest with bitter anger. All they lacked was the courage a few drinks would supply. While he watched he saw a bottle being passed eagerly from hand to hand.

"Three-four of you get around in back," Griffith yelled. "Put some lead in there from that side."

He had reloaded his gun, and was methodically drilling slugs through the front of the building. Others in the crowd, effectively hidden in shadow, began to do likewise.

Terry lurched up to his feet, and old Jefferson dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Son, there ain't a blamed thing you can—"

"Jeff, damn it, something's wrong!"

"Plenty's wrong. You blind?"

"I don't mean that. Where's Beard an' where's Selroyd? If Beard was still in there he'd be yelling."

"Why, they—" Jeff began, and then stopped. A moment later he snapped, "Hangin' the double-cross on Griffith! They got $20,000 they can count on. They aim to take that an' skip."

It had been in Terry's mind, and all Jeff Bones had done was phrase it. The little editor stood stock still, bitterness strong and hard on his wrinkled face.

He owed Gravelly Gap nothing now. The men of the town were in front of him, ready to destroy everything he owned, ready to kill him. But Ross Beard was cheating them, not him.

Old Jefferson spat into the dirt. "They'll have one hell of a headache, wakin' up from this party."

Terry didn't answer. Through all of its hand-to-mouth existence, the *Gazette*

had battled greed and crookedness. It was finished now, bankrupt beyond any hope of salvation, but the end wasn't going to be a mean and whimpering one.

Griffith shouted, "Where's that pole? Hurry it up, can't you?"

"Jeff," said Terry, "keep an eye on Frank here. I'll be back in a minute."

"Look here," grumbled the old man, "if you're figgerin' to—"

Terry was gone, sliding out the front of the shop and along the building wall. Behind him Jeff Bones began to swear excitedly.

Terry waited until he was beyond the rim of the crowd, then he began to run. He saw the black shape of Ross Beard's office. It was quite dark, but it was possible that the windows had been blanketed.

Terry was running in the middle of the street. He kept up his driving pace as he swerved in at the door, rolled his shoulder over and hit the panel with every ounce of weight he had.

Behind him, just before he struck, he heard the first crash as the pole in the hands of the mob was swung against the *Gazette's* door.

He hit with his stocky legs pumping hard, and the lock held just long enough so that the rusty screws of the hinges pulled out and the whole door went toppling inward.

A blaze of light spilled into his eyes. The door struck someone who was kneeling on the floor, tilting over so that Terry was thrown to one side. Terry's sixgun was in his fist and the impact of the fall made him tug the trigger involuntarily so that a slug cut loose wildly.

It was that single wild shot, perhaps, which upset Selroyd.

The slender gunman was sitting on a corner of Ross Beard's desk. From his holster he whipped a short gun with greater rapidity than Terry had ever seen before, and shot five times in a continuous blur of sound and spitting smoke.

The bullets plowed into the floor within two inches of Terry's head, kicking up dust and splinters.

They made a single ragged hole no larger than a half dollar.

And then, because he was a gunman as well as a trick-shot specialist, Selroyd hesitated before he spent the last bullet.

He was leaning forward, peering with slitted and vicious eyes through the churning powdersmoke, when Terry got in his first honest shot. The bullet bored through Selroyd's throat.

Terry squirmed around on the floor like a beetle with an injured leg, seeing for the first time the man whom the door had struck, and what he was doing.

It was Beard. He had pried up one of the boards of the floor, and had been kneeling to lift something from the hiding place beneath it.

He had reached down with his right hand and picked up a package of banknotes. The falling door had knocked him sprawling, but he had scrambled around to his knees. His weather-rough face was bleak with passion. His salt-sprinkled hair fell over his forehead in a tumbled shock.

★

BEARD knew what he had to do, and do at once, but some deep core of avariciousness in the man made him cling to the banknotes. His gun was under his left armpit, in the normal position for a right-hand draw. He reached for it with his left hand, gambling that he would have time to pull it before Terry turned on him.

That gamble cost him a split-second, and cost him his life, as well.

He had the gun out and swinging around when the little editor pumped two bullets through the left side of his chest.

Terry whirled around on his knees, because there were other sounds coming through the ringing of gun thunder. He saw Jefferson Bones come legging it into the area of light thrown through the doorway on the walk, saw the old man stumble as a bullet hit him. Then Jeff turned and blasted away with the shotgun held at his hip.

Jeff came on inside. The cloth at his shoulder was soggy, but no one would have known it to look at his saddle-leather face.

"Well, there's one more—there's that Griffith—won't do no more trick shootin'. Not with an arm gone," he said.

"Where's Potter?"

"Tucked down behind the anvil. He

could stay there a week an' nobody'd find him. Ain't likely we will neither, son. The rest of that bunch is comin' along."

Terry could hear them. The mob was shouting as it surged up the street to block any hope of escape from the office.

Terry said softly, "There'll be a few of 'em wish they hadn't, Jeff."

They waited there, the two of them, guns ready, knowing they had no chance, but ready to make their going out a costly affair.

Outside in the dark street, the surging rumble of the mob grew more controlled. After a bit one man's voice could be heard. What he had to say wasn't distinguishable, but presently there was no more haphazard shouting at all, and that one man called out:

"Don't plug me, Terry. I'm comin' in. I got something to show you."

"Come along," said Terry, on his knees, his gun leveled and cocked.

The speaker was a slim man wearing a green eyeshade, no coat, and black cloth dust guards reaching from wrist to elbow.

"That telegram Jeff sent," he began excitedly. "They sent an answer."

Behind him in the doorway others crowded up, staring in at the scene of devastation and death where the acrid fumes of powder-smoke still lingered.

"Beard!" blurted the man with the green eyeshade. "Ross Beard and that Selroyd—they're both wanted back in Nebraska, according to the descriptions—for murder, and for crookin' a county out of money that'd been voted—"

T. Theobald Terry got up slowly from his knees, tucking the short gun back into his waistband.

Jeff Bones

Not very much more needed to be said. There for all to see was Ross Beard, the hole in the floor and the wad of currency in his fist providing the final bit of damning testimony.

Terry looked at old Jefferson. "They get into the office?" he asked.

The old man scraped at a stubbled jaw. "Busted the door a little," he admitted, "but the shootin' started up here 'fore any real damage was done."

Terry pushed through the crowd and out into the street. Men reached for him and called to him, but he paid no attention. On his wrinkled face was no emotion whatever, because he and the *Gazette* were still whipped, and he knew it.

THE gray light of dawn made the *Gazette* office seem more shabby and unswept than it ordinarily was. Jefferson Bones straightened from beside the cot at the back where Frank Potter, with his leg set, was sleeping like a log.

Somberly quiet, Terry sat huddled in a chair, his glance fixed on the floor at the base of the press, to which he had not the courage to lift his dead black eyes.

"Too bad Griffith didn't live longer," old Jefferson said. "He could have told us whether Beard clouted himself on the forehead or had one of his friends do it."

It didn't matter. The story was clear and straight now, but it wouldn't be printed, because there would be no *Gazette*.

Jefferson understood why Terry didn't answer, and, stirred to savage anger for the first time Terry could remember, the old man said, "Damn 'em! Damn the whole lot of 'em! They sit back on their haunches lookin' smug while the paper that fought their fight for 'em goes to the wall! I got half a mind to—"

Terry said softly, "We had our chance to play it different. We knew what we were walkin' into."

Jefferson Bones had his mouth screwed up to say more when the front door of the office swung open. George Barr, storekeeper, was a thin, middle-aged man, solid but not a fighter.

"Kind of early. You boys open for business yet?"

"Day an' night," said Terry, "the

(Please turn to page 129)

Up the Trail

LIKE everyone we know during these times, *Star Western* is carrying a double job. And, again like the rest of us, your magazine is both proud and glad to be able to do this. We have, of course, been printing our own special kind of fast-moving and colorful Western fiction for almost ten years—the kind of fiction that makes us all proud of our native heritage, and that makes us realize, perhaps more than ever, that this country is well worth any sacrifice to insure its survival as a place where freedom and tolerance instead of terror and oppression rule.

And now, since paper is going to war, sixteen pages of *Star Western* is answering the call to the colors. We hope—and believe—that they'll do as satisfactory a job, perhaps in packing shells or plane parts, perhaps as a submarine or bomber's log-book or for the report form of a combat intelligence officer, that they've been doing here, in carrying on the fictional adventures of *Star Western* characters.

We're glad to tell our readers that bringing out a slightly slimmer magazine will *not* mean any reduction in the quantity of reading matter. By using type that is a little more compact, and yet perfectly clear and readable, the printers are able to print exactly the same number of words in a 130-page magazine as they did in a 146-page book. We'll be appearing with the customary six novels, plus departments and features. And Hoss Greer, Sudden John Irons, Bullwhip Bill McCrackin, and other *Star Western* friends will have just as thrilling adventures as they always have had.

Sometime ago, when the paper shortage was first evident, we started wondering if perhaps we weren't wrongfully using the paper that went each month into the pages of *Star Western*.

If people were going to have to do without radios, refrigerators, and new automobiles, why couldn't the publishing business be just as patriotic and donate its entire output to the war effort?

We were talking about that to a morale officer of one of our big traing camps.

"Not any," he said emphatically. "People get used to reading a certain magazine and they want to keep on reading it. That's the way it is with the boys at our camp. They're pretty definite in their likes and dislikes. The government realizes that. So, rather than have a number of magazines simply step out of the picture for the duration, they can all keep on going, if they reduce their size a bit. Just as you civilians will likely have to reduce your perimeters before the war's over—and you'll be surprised to know how much better you'll feel!

"The men at camp like Westerns, and we think you're doing a good job in giving them the kind of clean, out-of-doors action stories they like. So, you see, with the last sixteen pages actively in physical war work, and with the entertainment you're already furnishing, you're handling a couple of jobs—just like everyone else! Keep it up!"

We promised we would, just as we're promising you, our readers, that we'll keep on bringing you, each month through these pages, stories which recall the frontier courage and determination which are today reflected by our men on each of the wide-spread fighting fronts!

We think you'll see something of that in Walt Coburn's novel in the next issue; also in other powerful, human stories of the pioneers by Tom Roan, Dee Linford, William R. Cox and other famous writing men!

The next issue will be published April 2nd!

(Continued from page 6)

the Johnson County Invasion in 1892 as you are likely to find anywhere. It contains the names of the men of the "Powder River Army." Originally, I believe the library had two copies of this book, but one of them has been stolen. Persons who have visited the library tell me that the remaining copy is kept in a cage, chained to a table. Seems rather far-fetched, but it appears to have some foundation.

Some years ago I saw a copy of the original which was checked by the person who investigated the so-called "rustlers" for Captain Folliet Whitney, Eighth Infantry. Captain Whitney had an interest in the N. W. Cattle Association. No evidence was found which connected Champion with rustling. This investigator found that tremendous pressure had been brought to bear upon both Rae and Champion. According to a statement made by Champion to a member of a national fraternal order there in Buffalo, the Association had urged Champion to pool his cattle with theirs in the round-up the fall before. Then the cattle kings shipped Champion's cattle along with their own and kept the money received from the sale.

Most of its members were in the same boat. Champion had no money. Whether his brother bailed him out, or some of the townspeople helped him or if he worked that winter, I can't find out. But in April of that year the road between Fort McKinney and Gillette smelled like a slaughter house. Shot cattle were piled in windrows along the draws.

Now we come to the two men who spent the night with Champion and Rae in their cabin. Walker and Jones stopped there, on their way to Buffalo from their trap-lines in the Big Horns. The morning of April Ninth, Jones shoved down to the spring, about half a mile from the ranch house, to get a pail of water. Back of the log barn, a couple of muggs jabbed their guns into his back, led him to a clump of cottonwoods and tolled off a couple of hardcases to guard him.

Walker, his pardner, sauntered out, blithe as a cuckoo, and he, too, got throwed and tied. From him the invaders found out that the sole occupants of the cabin were now Champion and Rae. . . .

Meanwhile, Doc Rae started out to get the trappers, although Champion warned him that "someone at the stable wouldn't let them come back."

Rae was shot, but managed to crawl back, covered coolly by Champion who stood boldly firing a rifle in the doorway of the small ranch house until his pardner gained that shelter.

After Rae died from his wounds, the invaders shoved a wagon-load of burning hay against the house and burned Champion out. He made a run for it in his stocking feet. He never had wanted to die with his boots on, so he took them off. When his body was found in front of the cabin, it was literally torn to pieces by bullets. Some of the brave invaders had stood over him with high calibered rifles and pumped him full of sinkers.

Bill Jones and Ben Walker were taken to Casper, after the invaders had sworn them to eternal silence. But after they got there, the trappers found that sympathy was all with the nesters. So—they told what they knew of the killings of Rae and Champion. Which was plenty.

The invaders then decided that the two trappers would have to be gotten rid of. So they loaded them on a train and headed them for St. Louis. Although on the way, several attempts were made to rescue these men, they

were so carefully guarded that rescue was impossible. After Jones and Walker reached Omaha, they were never heard from.

Meanwhile, Jack Flagg had passed the mess at the KC. He escaped the rifle bullets of the Invaders, and galloped into Buffalo. His small son, driving the running gear of a wagon, was forced to cut out one of the horses and mount it to make his escape. That wagon, by the way, was later recovered by the Invaders, and was the same one used as a go-devil to burn out Champion.

FLAGG had an arrangement with Champion, that Flagg would hear from Champion every three days, or Flagg would know something was wrong. Flagg warned Sheriff Angus, but when Angus and his posse reached the KC, he was too late.

After the Invaders holed up at the TA, they surrendered to the troopers, and got shoved in the clink at Fort McKinney. Captain Whitney and Colonel Van Horn, of the soldiers who had been called out by Presidential order, gave Walcott hell—Major Frank E. Walcott, chosen by the big cattle interests to head the invasion.

In the interim, the governor, backed by the big cattlemen, was pulling wires down in Washington. The Invaders were then taken to Fort D. A. Russell where they were treated royally.

It was all a political set-up. The same bunch, generally speaking, played ring-around-a-rosy with Tom Horn. They hired him. They knew he was not guilty of killing Willie Nickells, but Tom had served them well. Done his work. They no longer needed him. So they not only let him go to his death, quite confident that he would never talk, but actually pushed the affair. Just a little backwoods politics, where the boys played with knives.

As to Custer—my father served under Benteen. In his day the men of the Seventh were still fighting the Battle of the Little Big Horn. I once knew an old Indian fighter by the name of John Murphy—I think he was a member of the Twelfth Infantry—who had arrived at Custer's battlefield five days after the battle.

He always swore that the vanguard heard the hum of blowflies a mile down the river. It must have been tough going, for when Johnny was an old man in his eighties, he would waken the neighbors with his shrieks. Often he said he would wake up in the middle of the night, "all of a sweat, and me seeing the Seventh piled up as we found 'em."

Still alive and hale and hearty is a friend of mine—an eye-witness of the JC war. He knew Sheriff Red Augus, Deputy Sheriff French, George Meyers, Doc Rae, Ranger Jones, Foote, Whitney and Van Horn, and rode bounds on the Red Horse Ranch. He was "thar when she happened." He was brand inspector for the Matt Murphy cattle Association, a U. S. deputy marshal—although he strongly denies this; fought Apaches with Tom Horn, and wound up at Wounded Knee with Forsythe. He's seventy-five, bright as a new pin, and plenty foxy!

Pretty soon I'm hiking for the old Southwest, to soak my ornery hide in some hot springs and, at the same time, soak up a little history. This year the Veterans of Indian Wars are making a drive for new members and I'm hunting up some we think may be slowly fossilizing out there. . . .

Thank you, Mr. King, and there's always a seat for you on the top rail of the Branding Corral. We realize that the

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subject of the Johnson County war is still packed with dynamite in some localities of the West, and since the Branding Corral expresses the views of all our readers, we will be glad to hear from anyone holding any other viewpoints.

HERE'S a new candidate for membership in our Syndicate, with something to say about Billy the Kid and Sheriff Pat Garrett. We don't know if you agree with him or not—and we're not sure whether we do, either—but we think that he deserves a place here on the top rail.

Introducing J. C. Matthias, of Kenosha, Wisconsin. Take it away, Mr. Matthias!

Dear Strawboss:

I see you devote this space to anyone who wants to put in his two-bits worth about the old days out West. Maybe because I was a kid of twelve that July night in Old Fort Sumner when Billy the Kid was killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett in the Pete Maxwell house, I've always had special interest in that part of Western history.

I remember that word went round among the townsmen that week that Billy was supposed to be in town. I, myself, don't remember seeing him alive, although it seemed later that everyone in the country at that time was his intimate and trusted friend! He was, of course, well liked and thought of by the majority of citizens both in Fort Sumner, as well as by others throughout that part of New Mexico—excepting for the law-officers who were trying to arrest him, and the ranchers who claimed to be suffering cattle losses at his hands.

As I recall, it was somewhere around midnight when Garrett's two shots were heard. Almost everyone had gone to bed. Well, sir, in just about the time you could spit, word had gone around that Billy the Kid had been killed—only most of the men called it murdered. They lost no time in getting out into the street. And I got out by the expedient of swinging out of the window in my room, onto a close cottonwood, thence to the ground, and tried to lose

myself in the crowd, keeping a weather eye out for my father who had an unerring aim with the lash of a home-made buggy whip, when the target was the seat of my britches.

I firmly believe to this day that had Garrett showed himeslf then, or had anyone really wanted to lead that crowd, good men would have been killed there, before Maxwell's house. Every man amongst those citizens was armed with a six-shooter, and many carried rifles. They were mad. I recall that many of them were muttering that the Kid had been deliberately murdered in the Maxwell house; that he'd been shot down without a chance in a cold-blooded gun-trap planned by Garrett and his deputies.

Later, we learned that the officers sat up all night in the Maxwell house, six-shooters close at hand, their carbines across their laps, listening to the sullen curses of the crowd.

Fortunately, the mob did not attempt to rush the officers. After the inquest the following morning, Garrett, John Poe and Tip McKinney rode back to Roswell, their ears ringing with the imprecations of almost the entire population. It occurred to me, years later, that I was witnessing a most unusual thing: the sight of a generally law-abiding town, which had turned out in armed force to protest the killing of the most notorious outlaw the frontier had ever known.

Needless to say, among many of the small ranchers, as well as among the New Mexican *paisanos*. Garrett won no popularity contest for killing the Kid, although his act was to bring him nation-wide fame as a manhunter. In talking about those days not long ago with an old friend who had known both Garrett and the Kid, he recalled several interesting and, I believe, little known, sidelights on that tragic and colorful story.

He wondered if any one ever found the gun which Billy told a Mexican friend he had left in the fork of a juniper tree just off the trail as it crossed Capitan Gap. He was supposed to have hidden it there as he made his escape from Lincoln, after the Bob Ollinger

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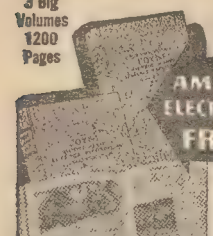

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killing. Because he was afoot at the time, he sought to lighten his load of two six-shooters, cartridge belts, rifle and leg irons.

His friend hunted for the gun, but apparently missed finding it. Later the friend repeated the story, and treasure-hunting expeditions were organized with the object of searching for the gun, but they had no success. Some folks have it that it has been found and kept as a memento; others, that it had fallen from the tree and is lost forever. If anyone who reads this actually has the gun in his possession, my friend and I think it would be a fine thing to turn it over to New Mexico as a permanent exhibit.

Not very many people know about the "dead man's curse" which, some say, was to follow Pat Garrett all his life and—so the more superstitious believe—finally resulted in Garrett's violent end during the first decade of this century.

Garrett had received word, some six months before the Kid's death, that Billy would arrive in old Fort Sumner to dance at a big *baile* there on Christmas night. Billy was a great hand for the girls; he was young, dashing, and as the Mexicans say, *muy caballero*. Accordingly, Garrett and some half dozen deputies hid out Christmas eve in a building on the Texas road, where Billy was supposed to ride into town with his crew.

Posting a man outside to keep watch of the moonlit road, they passed the time at poker, until the guard burst in with the information that five horsemen were coming into town. Garrett and his men burst out the door, their rifles ready.

Challenged by the sheriff, the man riding in the lead went for his gun, as the others wheeled and pounded away in the darkness. Garrett shot but the man still rode on, stiff in his saddle.

Garrett yelled to the man to get his hands up, and the rider replied that already he was mortally wounded. That was Tom O'Falliard, long-time pardner of the Kid during the outbreak of the Lincoln County War.

O'Falliard toppled, and the possemen caught him and laid him down in the snow. Apparently the cold revived him, for abruptly he rose and started screaming curses.

"I'm putting a dead man's curse on you, Pat Garrett," he yelled with a series of oaths.

They carried him inside the building, and with his last dying breath he called down all the maledictions he could lay tongue to before he died. He was buried in the little cemetery there at old Fort Sumner, beside which was later to be the grave of his saddle-mate, the Kid.

Garrett gathered fame after Billy's killing. He was at one time a captain of the Texas Rangers, sheriff and then Collector of Customs at El Paso until his retirement from public life.

He had at one time a comfortable fortune, but during the latter part of his life he lost most of his money. In 1908, worried and embittered, he was mortally shot by a young rancher with whom he had quarreled over the leasing of some of his ranch properties. The rancher, according to the records of the trial, did not fire until Garrett himself had picked up a shotgun and menaced the rancher with it.

Well, maybe they're right—those who believe in the dead man's curse. But for me, I think it was another kind of curse. Because Pat Garrett, Panhandle buffalo hunter, then saloonkeeper in old Fort Sumner, then sheriff, had for years been a friend and companion of the very man he killed.

When the Canadian River ranchers wanted someone to go after Billy, they wanted someone who knew him well; knew his habits, his hang-outs. Garrett volunteered for the job. He was a straight shooter; both he and Billy knew that from the time he took the badge, it was to be a deadly game—one of shoot first, or be killed. But I have yet to figure out how any man, at any time, could stand up and drink with another man, play poker with him, go to dances with him—in short, be his friend, and then accept the pay for hunting him down and killing him.

That, mister, isn't in my book, and

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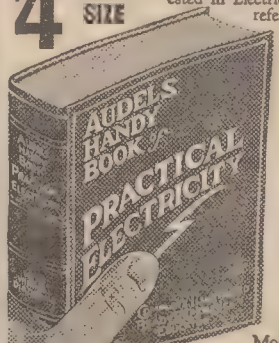

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never has been. So maybe, instead of calling it a dead man's curse, I'll call it sort of retribution, or poetic justice, or, like the Good Book says, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." Which, as it turned out in Pat Garrett's case, was curse enough!

Thank you, Mr. Matthias. But we're looking forward to hearing the other side of the question, because we believe there will be plenty of folks who'll be anxious to take Pat Garrett's part—a law officer of great bravery and integrity.

Here's a word from Jack Olmstead, of San Francisco:

Dear Strawboss:

I've been reading in your Branding Corral some letters about old-time stage drivers and Wells-Fargo shotgun guards. But I rise to point out that the boys who rode the hurricane deck of a Concord stage weren't the only ones with nerve. For example, during the early days of railroading, the express guards in those wooden "treasure cars" of Wells Fargo could qualify for bravery along with the best of them.

I was a railway express messenger during my younger days, and although I have never had any adventures worth talking about—my run was confined to the East—I have a warm spot in my heart for the old timers who risked their lives to guard other folks' money on the Western run.

Usually, in fiction stories of the West, you read that all the stick-up artists had to do was to fire a few shots in the air, or yell out that they were fixing to dynamite the express car, and the guards would tumble out like so many clay pigeons. This may be so in some cases, but I'd like someone to stand up on their hind legs and holler for the ones who stuck to their car and fought it out. How about it?"

That seems to put it up to the Syndicate, Mr. Olmstead, and we'll welcome any member who would like to put in a word for a non-surrendering Wells-Fargo railway express guard.

Yours—for Victory!

—STRAWBOSS

(Concluded from page 120)

Gazette's been open ever since we landed in this town."

"That's what a few of us got to speculatin' on," Barr said. He stepped inside. There was someone behind him, and another man behind that one, and then another.

They came trooping into the office until the space between the counter and the door was crammed with men. And many of the faces were faces Terry had seen in the mob, a few hours earlier.

"I'd kind of like to pick up some of those *Gazettes,*" Barr explained. "That special edition. You got maybe ten of 'em you could spare?"

"They ain't for sale," Terry said.

"Not to send around," Barr amended hastily. "Sort of as souveniers. So we wouldn't forget what kind of a jackpot we almost got sucked in on."

It was Jefferson Bones who exclaimed in a loud voice, "Mister, any time we got somethin' printed on paper, folks kin buy it if they want to."

He went with long strides to the rear of the office, returned with an armload of the useless *Gazettes.*

Barr laid a ten-dollar bill on the counter. "I figure that's cheap," he said.

Behind Barr there were others. For nearly two hours Jefferson Bones doled out *Gazettes* at a dollar a throw.

When it was over, and the last man had walked out of the office with his papers under his arm, the old man turned accusingly to Terry.

"What was it," he demanded, "you was callin' the folks in this town? Sittin' there smug, you said, while their paper got drove to the wall? You said—"

T. Theobald Terry grinned. He swung up to his feet and looked at his watch.

"Jeff, if we aim to get out a *Gazette,* we better hurry. We got the story. Slide down to Barr's and pick up every scrap of wall paper he's got. I don't care what kind of patterns he has. The other side's blank. We'll have this story on the street before sundown!"

Jefferson Bones skidded his shotgun back under the counter and reached for his hat.

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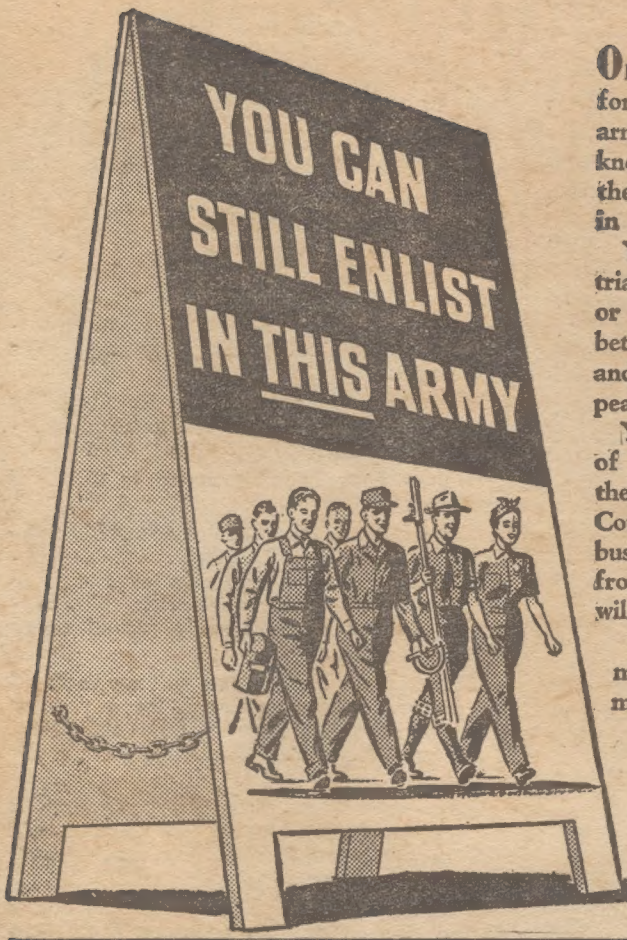

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